

Nightfall

by Le'letha

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1. Chapter 1

**Nightfall**

**Le'letha**

Summary: Canon-divergent: 20 years after Chief Stoick's wife and son were lost in a dragon raid, the Vikings of Berk shoot down a Night Fury—and its rider, a feral youth who believes he is a dragon.

Author's Note: In the course of a wonderful PM conversation with **Raberba girl**, we found we agreed in our belief that movie-canon Hiccup was going to end up delegating much of the human side of chiefting to Astrid in the near future. (I give him a week before he thinks of it; four months before she's running the place.) Raberba girl added that he'd be much happier as 'a crazy feral dragon boy', a concept that would not leave me alone. Thank you, Raberba girl! Musings on such, below. (First story in this fandom; learning the ropes.)

Disclaimer: In addition to things I obviously do not own, the cover image for this story is part of a picture saved years ago in my extensive screensaver file as "Night of the Dragon". The art site I may have originally gotten it from seems to be down today. I do not know the original artist. Apologies. I don't own it.

ON WITH THE SHOW!

**Nightfall**, Part One:

Predawn dragon raids on Berk are so common these days that it is not at all unusual for the island's people to wake up with a start or a scream or an axe already in their hands on mornings when " and because " there are no dragons in the sky.

This is not one of those mornings. It's a full-scale raid and a big one. They're hungry, the damn beasts, and the efforts to keep them out of the underground cavern carved out of the rock face to shelter the herds and their stocks are going badly.

Stoick the Vast, chief of Berk's Vikings, smashes aside a burning wall as it falls around him, using the weight of the giant hammer to clobber the nearest Zippleback head, which screams at him and pulls back, taking off and away. It/they don't go far, though, and he curses in the two-headed creature's direction.

All around him is chaos. The Vikings have been fighting dragons all their lives, and they are giving a good account of themselves. They have to. They win; they hold; they leave; they die. They're always trying to win; they're holding; Vikings do not ever back down from a fight, not even one that's been going on for hundreds of years, and especially not one of those. The last is unthinkable.

Even if all his people upped and left tomorrow, Stoick would stay. His tribe has paid in blood all that time, in limbs and treasures and lives and families. Dragons killed his own wife and baby son, and he has completely never gotten over that, nourishing his hatred on dragon blood and skulls. He holds their faces before him in every fight, the woman he can never forget and the baby whose face has blurred over time into all the hundreds of babies who have been and grown up to become the people he fights for.

"Wishin' ye'd let me put tha' edge on it, then?" Gobber calls to him now, having seen the short-lived victory. He's been trying to get Stoick to let him add all sorts of spikes and jagged edges and gods know what to the warhammer for years now, off and on.

Stoick's seen what his friend does to metal when he's let loose on it, though. The ill-assorted collection of blades strapped to the stump of his left arm is example enough. There are at least three knives pointed in every direction but directly at the man it's attached to, and as for the contraption in the middle of the town being fought around and run into " !

"She's no' supposed to be like tha'," the blacksmith retorts defensively, following the chief's pointed glance at what was basically a catapult, but one with a serious design flaw. "Worked like a dream, 'til those twin 'orrors got to 'er. Can't even begin to figure out what they did to 'er. Brawlin' in my shop! Ought to fire them out of it."

"You can't aim it, Gobber," Stoick growls. Otherwise he'd let the sarcastic old smith follow through on his threat. But the way it is now, those two would probably fly into the Great Hall and blow up the roof. "And it fires very large rocks with spikes on them, when someone breathes at it wrong. Do not load it."

He knows it was a mistake to say that the moment he does.

Battle din or not, there's a sheepish awkward silence radiating from

beside him.

Stoick glowers. "You already did, didn't you." It's not a question.

"Ahâ€|no?"

Down in the square, two warrior women are holding off a beleaguered Nadder, battering the bright blue-purple animal from both sides. Every time it moves away from one, the other herds it back towards her friend. It's losing, and desperate, so of course the mad thing goes on the attack. Its lunge knocks over one woman and swings around to smash the other away when she moves in, but the Viking still on her feet stays up by stabbing a dagger into its snout and supporting herself on the blade. It screams and jumps at the same time, and the battling pair goes flying.

They hit Gobber's malfunctioning, loaded, and primed catapult. Something snaps audibly, and its payload goes flying, vanishing into the dark in a broadly upward direction.

The blacksmith shrugs. "Or mebbe aye."

High above the village, something _screams_ in pain and fear, an alien, echoing, discordant sound, high-pitched and complex. It's like no dragon he's ever heard before, and he stares up into the night in surprise, trying to spot it.

There â€" a shadow, falling all but straight down, thrashing, still making that oscillating shriek.

Stoick runs to intercept it, making a guess and then correcting his path when something dark hits a market stall, demolishing it entirely. Dragons he and his Vikings can deal with â€" when they know the creatures' weaknesses. Every dragon has one. If you don't know it going in to a fight with a dragon, you're unlikely to come out. Until he knows more about this particular dragon, it's his responsibility as the chief to be the first to be in danger, and the last one out.

Its spectacular crash landing has already drawn the attention of the nearby fighters, Viking and dragon alike. The humans stare. The dragons â€" Stoick doesn't fully register this until later â€" retreat.

Stoick's reputation as a dragon fighter is well deserved. His people let him take the lead as he advances on the heap of wood and stone and metal and darkness, the last of which is moving, crawling out of the mess.

Alive and kicking, then.

Even in the torchlight and the flames of burning buildings and smoldering fields, the beast is black as night and madder than...oh, _Hel_...

"Get back!" the chief roars. "All of you, back away! And get me an axe!" His heavy warhammer is his favorite weapon and he knows how to use it against the regular fare of monsters that invade his island and threaten his people, but this is a jet-black dragon, a shadow

demon, a Night Fury, an impossible mythical thing, here and now and angry and hurting. Gobber will be delighted: he wants something with an edge.

He's immediately offered a dozen and he snatches the largest from the growing semicircle of the morbidly curious and those more bloodthirsty and glory-hungry than frightened of a creature no one has ever really seen or knows how to kill.

Hefting the axe in one hand and sizing up his enemy, Stoick is going to find out.

It's smaller than some dragons but more compact, black scales in the half-darkness of predawn and fire making it difficult to spot any cracks in its armor or old wounds. There's something tangled around it, leather or rope, and it's crouching defensively to shield its left wing, which is trailing in the dust at an odd angle and shaking slightly. The creature shrieks at them, but it does not take off, and, as every child knows, if a dragon is grounded in battle, it's dead.

Still, it rears up partway, tail thrashing, and fires a blast that makes spots go off in the chief's eyes at a cluster of his Vikings that have gotten too close. Someone screams.

"I said get back! NOW!"

The crowd backs away a few steps. Somewhere behind him, he can hear Astrid chewing the spectators out and sending them off to defend against the still-ongoing raid. Gods bless her; he couldn't have had a better heir to lead these warriors someday if she were his own blood. She's good with people, strikes just the right balance between letting people challenge her and staying in the lead; she has the gift for it. She's indispensable to him and someday she'll be one of the best leaders Berk has ever seen, a proper Valkyrie.

He finds the balance of the axe and advances. The black dragon, paws braced on the ground again, glares at him hatefully.

The challenging roar his approach evokes, he realizes only after the fact, does not come from the beast.

Something appears on the Fury's back and leaps down to the ground between dragon and Viking chief, howling a dragon-screech all but indistinguishable from the Fury's. It's like nothing he's ever seen before " anyone has ever seen before " and the silhouette is jumbled and confused in the semi-dark.

Compared to the bulk of the Viking it's facing down defiantly, it's small, scrawny, lightweight. It might be a dragon with a mostly human shape, or a human in a dragon skin. The flash of scales on its body and the fin on its back with the way it hunches as if equally accustomed to standing on four legs as two suggests it is a dragon, although one he's never seen before. As does the roar.

But when it opens its mouth and bares its teeth in a snarl, it's a human mouth in a human face, and no dragon has ever had a mop of auburn hair. To describe it as having been hacked at with a blunt and rusty knife would be to miss the opportunity to suggest that it has been trimmed back by being chewed on by accident. It has human hands,

currently raised before it as if to scratch and claw. It has human eyes, although they are dragon-wild.

Human, Stoick decides, realizing that the scales it wears are armor and there are straps and buckles and pockets and ties and things attached to it that he cannot make out or hope to understand in a brief glance. But unlike any human he's ever seen or heard of.

It paces back and forth between the dragon and the Vikings threatening it, shrieking a complex jumble of unintelligible, animalistic sounds. Its " his " anger and fear are obvious as it makes aborted lunges at Vikings obviously holding weapons, which is essentially all of them, trying to drive them back.

The unprecedented sight in addition to the no-longer-mythical monster has the battling warriors frozen with confusion and surprise, though, and no one moves back very far. Since the odd creature is reluctant to go much out of arm's reach of the dragon, it is the strangest stalemate the chief has ever witnessed.

It's a balance that can't last. Any second now someone is going to do something stupid.

Someone does. Snotlout, toting a sword already bloody from tonight and nicked from nights before, laughs and brags, "It's no match for me!" He charges, swinging the sword in wide and showy arcs once there's room.

The boy-dragon creature screams outright. Its hands drop from level with its hunched shoulders down to its waist, and then back up, leaping to intercept Snotlout and slashing at him. The glint of firelight on its hands is not enough warning.

Claws scythe, and the close-quarters engagement works against the armed Viking youth. The dragon-boy is simply in too close. His battle cry turns into a shout of shock and pain, and Snotlout reels back, dropping the sword to belatedly defend his face, only to discover that the smaller boy has jammed a foot behind his ankles and slammed scaled shoulder into armored chest, shoving him critically off balance and sending him flying.

In the time it takes for Snotlout to hit the ground, yelling and with blood dripping from between the fingers clutched against his face, the dragon's defender has retreated back to his previous post, jaw gaping and teeth bared, snarling. But the hands raised threateningly are now wearing thick leather gauntlets tipped with bloody dragon claws, pulled from his belt as fast as thought.

The boy wears them, wields them, as if they had grown there. The clear creativity and workmanship prompt Stoick to take another look at the leather tangled around the black dragon.

It's not tangled, he realizes; it's not even accidental. It's a harness, connected to a thick pad that could even be a saddle. A riding harness. He'd been riding the beast! How could anyone " what kind of monster could " or would "?

Snotlout is alive " he's trying to get back up, and he's shouting too loud to be dead anyway " but that the stranger had won the brief fight enrages the staring crowd, and they begin to advance

threateningly.

The dragon rider bristles, shoulders shifting, and roars. More convincingly, the Night Fury shrieks in a breath and sends it out again as a blast of power, scorching over the heads of the Vikings and reminding them why this particular dragon is so feared.

Suddenly, in the midst of the screaming, Stoick hears a garbled sound he almost understands, something like "_nuh nuh nuh nuh nuh nuh_!"

No, no, no, the boy, if it is a boy, is saying.

For an instant, the Viking chief looks away and back at the dragon, sheltering behind its peculiar protector and nursing its wounds, trying to fold a wing clearly broken in at least two places. His attention does not go unnoticed â€" the dragon cries out and whips its tail around, wrapping the boy in its fins and pulling him back against its chest.

He doesn't fight the movement, pushing his shoulders against the dragon's hide. The boy raises a still-clawed hand to the Fury's face and pets it with the back of the glove, caressing even as he watches their enemies with fear and hate in his eyes.

Softly, under everything else, Stoick thinks he can hear the dragon making noises at the boy, and the boy making noises back, indistinguishable from one another. They are _talking_ to each other, he realizes.

Despite the fact that no one has been listening to him at all tonight, Stoick tries one more time. "Stop! All of you! While you stare at one dragon, four dozen more raid our herds and burn our homes! Get after them!"

Something in his voice must have suggested that he really means it this time, because some of the crowd scatters. It won't last for very long â€" Stoick knows how the local dragons attack, and this raid is already dying down. Sometimes it's because the Vikings have driven them off; sometimes it's because they've run out of food to steal. In this case it may just be because the sun is going to start coming up any minute now.

The result is marginally quieter. He also finds two pairs of malevolent eyes fixed on him, unnaturally unified and focused. He's just identified himself as the leader; they know he's the biggest threat.

"You," Stoick booms, pointing at the dragon-like boy, who flinches back from the protruding finger as if it were a knife. "Do you understand me?"

The stranger tips his head to the side, pulling away even further and turning his head slightly to look at Stoick out of the corner of his eye. There's something familiar about his face and manner, but Stoick can't place it. It's probably that the movement makes him look even more like a dragon, keeping an enemy out of his blind spot. He knows he's looking at a human, but all the patterns keep trying to tell him that it's a dragon.

Dragon or boy or both are making a constant low growling noise. And the dragon, he notices, is looking for weaknesses in the armed circle keeping it confined to its crash site.

"Do you talk?"

The focus of the boy's attention is still the finger, not the words. The chief lowers it, and is rewarded for this act of perception by hostile eyes " also green, he notices as the sky gets progressively lighter and the dragons cut through the smoke from the village and take it with them off into the sky as they retreat " shifting back to his face.

The reply, if it is a reply and not just a string of animal noises, is meaningless.

"You don't have any idea what I'm saying, do you? Good." Without looking around, he adds, steadily and without changing his tone, "Astrid, get everyone we can spare out of sight." He knows she's there. "Issue crossbows, javelins, and bola to anyone who knows which way is up and won't forget what they're doing and attack their neighbor instead."

(That rules out babies, Bucket, and the twins. One day, Stoick is going to nail those two into a barrel and drop it in a riptide.)

"On my signal."

She takes off without a word, and Stoick decides to stall. While the dragon's biggest advantage " its wings " are disabled, that blast of fire unlike any he'd ever seen come from a dragon would be deadly. If the Fury decides to burn its way out the way any dragon would, Stoick is going to lose a lot of good people, and he has no idea if the creature has a shot limit. They know nothing useful about the beast; before right now they didn't even know if it was real or just a legend.

The chief points at the dragon and the boy, still pressed together, to get their attention. He does not want them looking around as the trap closes.

"Listen here," he says, knowing they don't understand. He presses a big hand against his breastplate. "Stoick," he says, then repeats his name slowly. "Sto-ick." Then he points back at the boy. "You?"

The pantomime is holding the boy's attention, at least, although he can just barely hear the dragon making little noises as it watches everything else. If they're really talking, this is not going to be a very successful distraction "

"Stoick," the chief gestures to himself and says again, then reverses the hand and stays silent.

There's a long, long pause. Stoick can hear his people gathering as he studies the boy's face. Where in Hel's name had he come from? He searches for any of the recognizable traits of the more distant tribes of the Archipelago. Something is still familiar there, but he can't quite put his finger on what.

And he's sure he would have heard by now if someone had managed to control a dragon " people had tried in the past, and mostly they had ended up as flaming and half-eaten testimonies to why dragons were uncontrollable monsters. He had lost Valka because she had thought she had time to get to the baby and get away without provoking that gigantic creature.

But the way he acts, sounds, looks " the boy is almost a dragon himself.

Then "

The boy's unidentifiable face works awkwardly, and he makes a hissing, ticking sound something like "_St-t-t-t-t-kk_". He raises one claw-gloved hand and points at the chief. Then, to Stoick's surprise, he adds "_Pfikingr_" and a snarl, snapping the hand to one side in a slicing motion. The chief thinks he can hear 'Viking' in there, and the aggression doesn't need translation.

Regardless, it's almost communication. "Yes," he rumbles, "Stoick. And _you?_"

He seems to understand now, and puts a hand against his chest in imitation. But Stoick instantly knows that he hasn't a chance of being able to repeat the sound the dragonish boy makes.

It's not even a word, just a pair of sounds: a _click_ and something like a _phuh _.

Trying to decode it, he misses completely that the boy immediately puts the same hand on the dragon's nose and makes a hissing noise that sounds a bit like "_Tt-th-ss_".

After a moment, he tries, "Ick-puh?"

The exasperated grimace is the most human expression Stoick's seen on that face so far. The nagging at the corner of his memory gets louder.

He repeats both noises, the sound the chief has identified as the boy's name and the sound for the dragon.

"Ickk-puh," he gets out, putting the emphasis on the first sound this time and watching the boy react. Something about the sound clicks a realization into place.

Valka; he looks like Valka, Stoick thinks, _but he's colored like me!_

"Oh my gods," he says.

"Nuh," the boy corrects, "nuh ummmmmu-" A slightly different click. "-ttss." And repeats his name again, and the dragon's.

Stoick is not listening. He's fast for a man his size, which has surprised many a foe, and he whips around and shouts as loudly as he can, "HOLD FIRE!"

The sound echoes off the remaining buildings and the sea cliffs, startling up a seagull chorus of surprised Vikings who had been

looking forward to a surprise mob attack on a single example of a variety of hereditary enemy which had previously only existed in nightmare stories. It was very similar to a reaction that, in another time and place, the announcement of the cancellation of a much-anticipated treat might have on a crowd of six-year-olds.

The chief will placate them later, as long as they don't shoot.

He stares at the wild, green-eyed boy, incredulous and disbelieving and hoping.

"_Hiccup?_" he says.

If he was hoping for a flash of recognition, he is disappointed. The dragonish boy has taken advantage of his momentary lapse of attention to leap to the saddle on the Night Fury's shoulders, and the dragon has, over the course of Stoick's diversion, folded both broken and unbroken wings in tight.

Stoick realizes he wasn't the only one who was stalling for time.

It shrieks in a breath, twists around, and fires a blast into a building that had escaped undue fire damage, until now. It all but explodes, and as chaos and confusion, shouting and running, erupt all over again, the black dragon takes off running, scorching through town and off into the mountain forest, vanishing into the trees with its impossible companion on its back.

Part of Stoick wants to stand there and stare after them; gaping. Another part of him wants to grab Gobber by his shirt and shake him and yell did you see that too? Still another wants to deny what he thought he just saw. A very small part wants to go back to bed.

The largest part of him is a war chief whose people have just weathered another attack with a very strange coda, whose village is still smashed and smoking, and who, from the sound of it, are already spreading rumors. That's the part that takes over.

"Fire squad, form up with Fishlegs," he orders, because there's still smoke rising and that means a live fire. "Someone get that sheep away from the cliff before it walks off the edge and we lose another one. Get the wounded to Gothi. If we have anyone dead, I want to know. Did they break into the cave storage? Check it. Spitelout, form up a team and get those creatures in the traps to the pit."

Astrid emerges from the regrouping crowd and meets his eyes, requesting either a task to carry out or permission to give her own orders as she sees fit. On any other day, he would set her loose on the repairs and the battered tribe with pride.

Today, he beckons her to his side with a single finger, discreetly.

"And if anyone tries to go after that dragon," he roars, "whatever it does to you will be nothing compared to what you'll catch from me! The village comes first!"

He sees obedience in his people, by and large. They understand where their priorities need to be.

Mostly. "Gobber," he says, expressionless.

"Aye?"

"Find the twins something heavy, awkward, and useless to move some great distance. And make sure they do it."

The blacksmith grins from ear to ear, which is terrifying. "With _pleasure_."

"And me?" Astrid asks when he's gone, off on a well-trodden warpath.

"You," he tells her solemnly, "are the exception. You're one of the best trackers on Berk, and you're smart enough not to try engaging that Fury on your own. It can't fly, so it's somewhere on the island. _Find it_."

She's pleased by the compliment and the challenge. "Got it, Chief. Um, Chief?" she adds as he walks away to lead his tribe. She sounds unusually unsure.

"Yes?"

"Didn't you once have a son named Hiccup?"

"Go find them."

* * *

><p>To be continued.

2. Chapter 2

****Author's Note: ****You _guys_. Um. Wow. Nice to meet ya'll. (That's my _one_ yearly self-permitted usage of the locally invented and accepted "ya'll". You made me smile a lot, so I decided to use it on you.) As a thank you for your support, you get this chapter a day earlier than I planned to release it to you. That being said, I'm now out of pre-written material, so the next chapter will probably take a bit longer.

ON WITH THE SHOW!

****Nightfall****, Part Two:******

He wakes, and regrets it. He hurts from the _fall_ and the _scared_ and the _Toothless-soul-love hurting_. He had his wings, he could have landed on his own, but that would mean leaving _Toothless scared_ and _no no no_.

They fly together. They fell together. _Yes yes_.

Still, he whimpers quietly when he moves.

The dragon-wing wrapped over him where he lays shifts slightly, just enough for Toothless-_heart-of-mine_ to see him, green eyes saying _love love love_ and _worry_. Hiccup shifts on the sand to push his spine closer to the bigger dragon's dark warm scales, and chirps

good happy love good. Toothless purrs _good love good_ back at him.

He rolls to all his paws and leans against his dragon-love's side, rubbing scale-skin against soft-skin and scale-leather skin and fin and wings so that they smell like each other and the itches of sleeping on sand are soothed. They croon laughter and comfort at each other and Hiccup crawls out from under the extended wing and into the space between chest and throat and jaw, nudging his skull into the soft space under Toothless' jaw, humming happily.

Hiccup was _so so so so scared_ last night _scared small scared_ and here and now with his heart-beloved warm and alive with him they are _joy love safe relief you we calm we relief regret love_, he vocalizes softly, hiding his face in the warm dragon-scent of Toothless' throat.

The black dragon lets him do it, rumbling _love_ through them both. It feels good on his bruises and Hiccup leans into it for a while, chirping little questions and happy sounds occasionally. It makes his body feel better but his heart hurts, remembering, and he pulls away, rubbing his cheek against Toothless' and moving to the injured wing on their other side.

The sight â€" even this afternoon as they wake â€" makes him angry, and he quietly clicks _mad scared hunt hurt sorry protect protect_ in a continuous furious tirade as he examines his work from early this morning.

Hiccup has the most delicate and clever paws of all of his nest-mates, and he loves to amuse himself or the others with the impossible things they can do. He does not remember learning how to sew or tie knots, but these are not the first stitches he has set, nor the first limb he has splinted. His kin sometimes raid Viking ships or settlements for the fun of it, or to get things they cannot find in their island nest, and Hiccup-Toothless sometimes go with them, if they are bored or if Hiccup wants something he cannot make himself, and sometimes the _pfikingr_ manage to hurt his kin. He does not like _pfikingr_, Vikings â€" they hurt dragons and they are stupid and cannot talk and cannot fly â€" but they can make things.

Toothless thrums at him _calm easy peace breathing love_, and Hiccup realizes that he has been chittering angrily as he checks the stitches.

Sorry sorry, he croons.

The breaks from the _rock fly?! rock fly?!_ are not as bad as they could be, but they are bad. Still, he has seen worse, set worse, seen his kin survive worse. They will fly again. He checks each laceration scrape by scrape, using all of his senses. He presses his lips to each closed wound to take the temperature of the skin and the blood and flesh below; sniffs for the uneasy stink of infection; licks them just to be sure and to reassure Toothless-_love_. Several repetitions of this in, he hits a deeper and painful wound and Toothless yelps, and shifts away.

Hiccup whimpers _sympathy sorry mistake forgive?_ and the other dragon licks him back, humming. He turns his face up to the gesture

and Toothless obliges, which is reassuring and familiar and, entirely as a side effect, plasters his fur out of his eyes again.

He is more careful after that. The wounds will heal. He tells Toothless _yes good yes relief hope promise fly good us yes_, chirping and cooing and returning to the black dragon's front paws, the better to wrap around his head and say it all again with touch.

Together they know that they are hungry. They would have hunted last night but they followed the other flock because they were hunting already and last night became _bad scary bad confusion no no falling falling falling_ and they did not eat. And they have fought and hurt and fled since then. The wind blowing into the sea-cave they have found and claimed smells like sea and flight and open air, with spray from the ocean below and the stubborn snowmelt running down the cliff wall to join it.

C'mon c'mon? Hiccup's tone asks, glancing towards the mouth of the cave and the sunlight there and back at Toothless.

Yes careful yes, he answers. The black dragon gathers himself, pauses, laughs a dragon-laugh and lifts one paw up into the air so that Hiccup, perched on those paws, tumbles to the side and onto his back in the sand. Hiccup stays where he's been put, laughing _yowp-yowp-yowp_ back at him. He stops laughing almost immediately, watching anxiously as Toothless_-love_ moves the splinted wing. Toothless moves it gently, not furling it in close to his side the way he should, but keeping it stretched out as if he were going to take off at any moment.

Hurting? Hiccup chirrs, worried.

Toothless purrs _no no good_ and noses at his partner-love to get him up off the sand, scooping him up with his flat nose and all but tossing him towards the sunlight.

Strange careful slow, Toothless reminds him.

Yes yes yes, and his voice says that he knew that, but his body says laughter, because he is reckless and Toothless has had to rescue him too many times _always will_.

Hiccup slinks towards the cave mouth, stomach nearly brushing the ground as he moves, step by step, keeping all his paws on the ground and ready to leap and fight or run if danger is outside waiting. He listens, raises his head to look out just a bit, and breathes in the wind.

He senses nothing of danger, and then all his senses are blocked out by Toothless_-beloved_ looming over him protectively.

Safe maybe careful still, he tells the bigger dragon.

Toothless hums thoughtfully, but agrees.

Still, they spy on the area for some time, hunters waiting patiently to avoid being hunted, before conceding that they are alone.

Lifelong habit and near-constant company means Hiccup habitually vocalizes his thoughts. He talks to himself because Toothless is himself. He can no more truly imagine Hiccup without Toothless than he could imagine himself dead. It would be the same thing.

Sun good nice warm str-e-e-e-tch happy you sun you awake sand itch itch hungry flying? Automatically, Hiccup looks over the edge of the cliff down to the seawater below, calculating the distance between their perch and the water and the depth of the water from the color it is, and judging the safety of a leap-glide flight into it from that and the wind and the color of the rocks and a thousand other things.

He has no name for this process, nor could he explain it. Hiccup can think abstractly, but he does not have the vocabulary to discuss it. He speaks fluently a language rich in emotion and sensation but devoid of measurements and hypotheticals. Similarly, there exists a disconnect between his thoughts and his pronunciation of the scraps of Norse he remembers or has picked up. He thinks of himself as Hiccup and his dragon-love as Toothless. He can no longer properly pronounce the names the way they were intended, and since it has been fifteen years since he heard his name addressed to him in a human voice, he cannot recognize the original sounds when they are spoken to him. His concepts of names are abstract, but often impossible to render into a human language. He is missing through lack of use several sounds that the Norse language takes for granted, so the handful that come from Norse roots are badly garbled and mispronounced. Some cannot be pronounced by a human. Others are simply ideas associated with an individual. Several of his nest-mates he thinks of as variations on The She Who Smells Like This.

He has a dozen or more variations on how he addresses Toothless.

Hiccup is intelligent, creative, innovative, inventive. He does not have the vocabulary to talk about it. He is loving, faithful, brave, true. These he says every time he speaks.

Already planning his descent, the dragon-boy remembers his beloved's injury. Toothless cannot fly, which is deeply wrong. They always fly together "they are a single self" and Hiccup does not want to fly if Toothless cannot. He yowls-whimpers this realization and unhappiness, turning back to the black dragon and attaching himself to warm scale-skin and the leather of the flying-with that Toothless wears except when Hiccup is making it better, which is, when they are back at the nest, often.

Toothless huffs stupid silly hatchling at this behavior, and nudges him away towards the edge. When Hiccup looks at him incredulously, he quorks their familiar ready you jump signal they use when they are about to glide together in the air, pushes him again, and then looks pointedly at the treacherous jumble of cliff-face and fallen rocks that they scramble-jumped up in the morning-light and the fear and the hurting to get to this refuge.

The dragon-boy loves to fly. He got tired of waiting for his wings to be and made his own so he could be a proper dragon and flirt-soar-glide with Toothless. Every opportunity is good happy good love joy.

Hiccup trills a happy, happy sound. It turns into a brief and adoring dragon-dance between the two of them. _You me we us_, Hiccup and Toothless sing to each other, dragon twining around dragon-boy clambering over dragon, petting climbing nuzzling touching loving each other, _you me we us_.

The apparently monotonous lyrics would not translate to a human listener, but it is both the simplest and most complex us-song they know. It is who they are and it is everything they are.

It ends when Hiccup's stomach makes an audibly hungry noise. Toothless stops still and lets his partner-love stumble into him. Hiccup collapses against him and they purr at each other.

Go go go, Toothless pushes him.

He needs no further encouragement to unfold his wings and jump, brief instant of sheer falling becoming a glide as his wings catch the wind, descending lazily with nothing but the water and the wind beneath him.

Hiccup has spent his entire life in the company of beings who can fly and who love him and care for him. He has never been afraid of falling because flight is as much a part of his life as air. He knows exactly what he's doing.

And even if he didn't, he'd probably do it anyway. It's glorious. It's living.

He veers and tilts and spins a bit, just for the fun of it and because he can. He is a dragon, he belongs in the air.

Just before he hits the ocean â€" faster than he'd like to â€" he flares his wings backwards and brings his back paws down to trail in the water, slowing him and balancing him as a tail should do. He would like a tail. Tails are good. He does not have one yet and he does not know why. Making the wings he missed so was good. Maybe a tail will be the same way.

A heartbeat later he's safely in the cold moving water, flailing to keep his head above the waves as the current tries to catch at his wings the way the wind does, pushing him around and down. But he knows its tricks and furls them away from the water's sneaky claws.

Rolling onto his back, Hiccup watches as Toothless descends to the inlet's beach a little slower, leaping from rock to rock and clinging to the nearly-sheer face briefly before taking aim at making a giant leap to the shore.

Not liking the plan he can see his heart's-love intending, Hiccup shrieks a scolding warning _no careful hurting bad no_ at him.

Toothless swings his head around momentarily to glare at him, screeches back _careful you? you? lookatme you! _but makes a slightly safer next couple of moves.

Hiccup purrs at the good joke. He has given advice he would not follow and he knows it. They both know it. It's a good joke.

Once Toothless is securely on solid ground, Hiccup feels able to look away and be aware of his immediate surroundings. He is pleased to see that between his unusual arrival and Toothless' descent, the local fish have recovered from their shock and returned to investigate him.

He twists in the water, reflexes drawing the one-claw from its sheath on his front leg and cutting into an unlucky fish in a single motion.

The rest scatter, but breakfast is off to a good start. They prefer to fish from the air, but they can hunt from shore too.

It takes him only a few minutes to rejoin Toothless on the beach, briefly and futilely trying to prevent gritty sand from replacing the grains he'd just washed away in the edges of his dragon-scale and leather skins. He will wash again later, as fishing will probably turn into playing once stomachs are quiet again.

Hiccup chirps a _fish_ sound, holding it out to Toothless.

Fish good fish good, the black dragon croons back, but makes no attempt to take it. _Fish fish?_

Fish fish fish, his partner agrees.

They hunt fish for a while, baiting them in to the shallows with the entrails of the first one and striking when they are just below the surface. It's a wet and messy process, full of splashes and yelps and laughter, working together one minute and then stealing each other's catches the next. Hiccup scares up a crab and stalks crabs instead. He likes them better than Toothless does, having more patience to get rid of the hard nasty shell. And fish are usually bigger, so they need fewer fish to feed a larger dragon. Hiccup is small enough to not need as many.

The dragon-boy eats a dragon's diet. His body is used to raw seafood; he has eaten cooked fish, although he would not think to cook them on purpose. Sometimes quarrels break out in the nest and fire is blown, and if the quarrel is over food then sometimes food gets burned. Then it's eaten anyway, because it's food. While he has had similar experiences with dragon-charred red meat, he has learned that _raw_ red meat does not agree with him, and has avoided it since the last attempt to share a red meat meal with Toothless or others of his kin.

Very rarely, he has tasted Viking foods, stolen from raids out of curiosity more than anything. A food he does not know as bread he thinks is boring. He has mentally catalogued a variety of cheeses, without too much success or necessarily knowing that they are all types of cheese. They all taste different " and universally off to his taste " so he does not associate them except as Viking food.

When he feels like it, he will eat nuts, when he can find them, and a few plants, including berries and fruits when he can find those. He does not know that his body is driving him to seek out certain nutrients missing from his regular seafood fare, and he cannot explain it to his kin. Experience has taught him a rough-and-ready

experimental method of testing new possibly-edibles, and, like the other dragons, he can deliberately throw up something he's eaten that he shouldn't.

Most of his meals, one way or another, come from under the water, but like all hunters and foragers, he eats what he can find and kill that won't come back to find him and kill him in its turn.

After they hunt their meal " not enough, but enough for now " Hiccup wades further into the water and beckons his Toothless-half to him. _Hurting water you water good hurting_, he commands, punctuating the demand with a whistled _now!_

The salt water will clean out the wounds that were hurting the black dragon before in the cave, and the wing is far enough away from the dragon's heart-fire to go briefly numb in the cold water. It's a straightforward if temporary treatment and not unusual for the two of them or dragons in general. Toothless grumbles anyway as he obeys the benign command.

Good good good better love, the dragon-boy coos to him, swimming to meet him and catching on to a strap of the flying-with before the waves can wash him away from his dragon-love. He floats there, letting the cold water, which he barely notices after a lifetime of exposure and his current proximity to Toothless' fires, rock him back and forth. Pleased, he rubs his cheek against the side of the other dragon's neck, humming deep in his throat.

He can _almost_ forget that they are grounded on an island full of _pfikingr_ who have already hurt them once, quite badly, and are uncomfortably _prepared_ to fight dragons.

And the _St-t-t-t-t-kk_ had made Viking noises at him, the memory of which unsettles Hiccup when it occurs to him. He hadn't understood any of it, except some of the name " too scared, too threatened, wanting to be anywhere else, _fear pain fear pain distress_ from and for Toothless-_beloved_ " but some of it had sounded vaguely familiar.

Toothless apparently interprets Hiccup's restless half-vocalized thoughts as a request to stop swimming, because he begins to tow his companion back to the shore. Although it is equally possible that Toothless has decided it was time to get out of the water anyway, and if Hiccup disagreed with him he could just let go.

As if that would ever happen.

Worried, Hiccup tells him, finding his feet beneath him as the black dragon trudges out of the water. _Want go_, he growls, indicating _here_ by kicking at the sand, _not like_.

The sad descending sound Toothless replies with means _can't_.

Hiccup's sigh requires no translation. A moment later he sets his feet in the ground he has just rejected and declares _you me love love love_. The rest of his thought is all body language, shoulders back and head up, chin tucked down. Challenging, resolute. It's an attempt at a stance he's seen other dragons take, but it doesn't quite work for him. Toothless understands, though.

Brave brave fierce us, the dragon-boy roars at the distant cliffs.

His partner-love deliberately pushes his nose into Hiccup's stomach, knocking the tail end of the roar into something between a huff and a squeak.

Thoroughly told off, Hiccup yelps, growls half-heartedly at Toothless, and gets knocked over completely for his pains. They wrestle on the ground, careful of the broken and bound-up wing, until the dragon-boy, still dripping from their swim, is coated in sand again and pinned in it for good measure.

Itch itch itch, Hiccup complains in a series of whines and squirms. _You win lemme up!_

Toothless laughs at him and, eventually, lets him up.

Released, he turns his back on the black dragon " fully expecting to get pounced on all over again " and strides off into the water again, making _hough hough hough _sounds repeatedly. It's an arrogant coughing noise someone they know makes all the time.

His dragon-beloved lets him get a step or two into the surf before scything his tail around and knocking him down with a splash. By the time Hiccup manages to come up for air with which to protest, Toothless is curled up a safe distance away higher up the small beach, broken wing stretched out to rest and one green eye peeking out from behind a tailfin to catch his reaction.

Prudently, Hiccup decides to admit defeat.

When he's clean but wet and cold, he joins Toothless-_heart's-love_ and climbs onto the bigger dragon's back to take advantage of his heart-fire heat and the sunlight both, drying his skins and warming him inside.

In enemy territory, grounded and worried and threatened, it's foolish for them both to sleep somewhere that the _pfikingr_ could find them. They take turns dozing in and out, bodies resting but minds kept partly on alert, renewed by being together.

* * *

><p>Hiccup is asleep and Toothless partly awake when the wind changes unexpectedly and the black dragon catches a new scent. His ear-flaps perk up, extending and triangulating, and he raises his head slightly, careful not to disturb the sleeper on his back, trying to identify where it's coming from.<p>

A moment later, he sees a movement at the scrubby forest edge that lets out to the shore. It's just a little bit _wrong_. Toothless decides that Hiccup-_beloved_ can always go back to sleep, and summons a blast of fire/power/energy as quickly as he can, snapping his head around with the unique and threatening sound doing this makes.

His dragon-boy wakes up almost instantly, rolling to a crouch with a snarl in his throat and his claws already on " Toothless can feel

them on the back of his neck as Hiccup puts a paw down lightly for balance and to tell Toothless where he is.

The clump of tree and undergrowth and rock he'd aimed at is a smoking absence. Toothless can't smell anything living burnt.

He only wonders for a moment before seeing the surviving culprit â€" a smaller Viking she, running now and making good time away from them despite the forest. He is angry and defensive and hurt and she was smart to run.

Hiccup is, for once, silent, waiting. It makes no difference â€" Toothless can hear him thinking by now.

Threat gone, Toothless chirrs.

Worry threat worry bad bad bad, his companion's growl says. A whistle: _Go?_

The bigger dragon looks around the area they have claimed as their own. They have access to food from the ocean and drinking water from the snowmelt cataract. They have a cave-nest they can get to but the _pfikingr_ probably cannot. They can see any of the dragon-killers coming. And they know it exists. This is an island they do not know. There might not be anywhere better.

This would be difficult to explain, but Toothless knows that his dragon-boy is clever and will understand for himself. He sighs and digs his front paws into the sand. _Stay. _He raises his head in the same pose Hiccup had tried to assume earlier. _Guard, protect, hold, _it means.

Neither of them go back to sleep.

* * *

><p>To be continued.

* * *

><p>Extensive Author's Note: â€|because someone will ask, and I was just recently talking to Raberba girl about this: when Hiccup and Toothless use the emotion/word _love_ to and about each other, it's not sexual or necessarily romantic, although the depth and emotional/spiritual passion of the very best and most intense romantic relationships are certainly very present. They are a touchy pair. But the physical contact here is much closer to a cat that wants to sit on you and be petted and cuddle. Or a dog, if you prefer. (Much of Toothless' body language in the movies is feline anyway, and I love cats. If you want to talk to me about the language choices I'm making for this story, expect occasional cat metaphors.)

Having said that, if reading this as non-platonic makes you happy, I am not policing your brain. It's _your_ brain. Fair enough: Hiccup at least is a just-out-of-teenage-years human (even if he doesn't know it) male and these two don't have any secrets or shame when it comes to each other. I am OK with you reading it that way, and if you want to tell me that you're reading it that way and I'm successfully hitting buttons I will be OK with that too. I'm told buttons are

nice. Embrace your buttons. But this story has a K-plus/PG rating and it will stay there.

3. Chapter 3

****Author's Note: ****If you reviewed anonymously, please know that I got your review, I read your review, I appreciated your review, and in many cases I then sat very still with my hand over my mouth, simultaneously blushing, deeply touched, and terrified, because now I have to live up to all you want this story to be. If you reviewed while logged in, the above applies to you too, but I probably told you that I knew what was going into this chapter. I was wrong. There's a scene in here that just happened without consulting me. You'll know it when you get thereâ€|

ON WITH THE SHOW!

Nightfall****, Part Three****

Astrid has never in her life run away from a dragon. Evaded, dodged, been driven backwards by, yes. Run? Never. Until today. Only the sight and shock of what that thing had done to her hiding place, and that Stoick had ordered her not to engage it and to report back directly, lessens her shame.

She manages to stop running before anyone sees her or before she's back in sight of the edges of the village, and as she composes herself, she swears an oath to herself and the gods that she will never run away from a dragon again, not even black-as-night devil dragons that vaporize rocks just because she happened to be looking at the thing and its unnatural feral boy. Ruthlessly, she squelches the cowardly part of her mind that's yelling wait, wait a second, never? Never ever? But we could die! It'll kill us! at the rest of her.

The thing hadn't even waited to see her to attack! No warning, no indication â€" she'd been lucky! Astrid wants this thing off her island and away from her people, and she only cares whether it's alive or dead when she gets rid of it because she'd rather it be dead, especially since it's evidently smart enough to carry a grudge. No one had seen it or engaged with it before Gobber's ridiculous contraption shot it out of the sky by accident, but once it was hurt â€" well, she'd barely escaped the consequences.

If it goes on the attackâ€|

She promises herself she's going to get rid of it before that happens, before it gets back in the air and comes after them all.

By the time she reaches the village she's back in control of herself, falling back into the almost-routine of getting the village back on its feet, fed, and sheltered after the local dragons have tried their best to smash them to pieces. She calls in a favor a family owes her for clearing up an in-house quarrel and gets them to put up another couple whose house is now missing a roof until they can repair it. When they look mutinous, she tells them to help their neighbors fix the roof, then, and they'll be out of their space that much faster. When she gets away from them, they're all looking for wherever their tools have gotten. (Inevitably, each family is sure that the other

has borrowed them.)

She stops a small boy from falling in the well with a bucket that weighs almost as much as he does empty and would outweigh him easily full, picking him up from off the edge of the well and handing him to the nearest pair of open hands, which happen to belong to Fishlegs and were apparently only empty because he'd put his own buckets down to wash soot off his hands, not to mention the rest of him. It means the kid gets covered in ashes and Fishlegs looks put-upon at being handed a little boy. She tells him that if the boy wants to fight fires so much, Fishlegs should put him to use and watch him closely.

"Did you see that _dragon_?" Fishlegs tries to ask her over the kid's head.

"Yes," she tells him shortly and walks away to the accompaniment of questions like "Was it really a Night Fury? How big was it? What did it sound like? The _Book of Dragons_ says â€" which is the point where she stops listening. She has definitely seen that dragon, and she doesn't really want to talk about it. Fishlegs can sound interested in it â€" he doesn't know how deadly it is.

A dozen more people ask her the same question, and most want to know if there was really a human with it. She tells them all variations on "Yes, it was a Night Fury. Yes, it had a rider. No, we don't know anything else. The chief will tell everyone when we know anything more. Have you seen him?" In this way she gets sent all over the village looking for him. Along the way she deals with people who want to complain that they've lost their pet sheep, people who are insistent that someone has borrowed their favorite axe and won't give it back because they killed a Gronkle with it and it's now a lucky axe for them, people who want to know if there are any plans for dinner tonight â€" at least that's an easy one, the night after a raid everyone eats in the Great Hall until they can make sure that everyone has food left in their houses, so of course there are plans for dinner tonight and she decides that everyone who asks her that should be sent up to the Great Hall to help if only because they should know better. And there are people who want to know if Berk is going to launch a counterattack â€" on _what?_ she doesn't say â€" and a whole array of problems that boil down to wanting reassurance that their tribe is still together and their leaders are still protecting them.

She manages to avoid Snotlout, who is back on his feet already and boasting wildly about having survived the fierce and ruthless dragon-man, who according to him is quickly approaching a height of ten feet and acquiring the ability to breathe fire. He still has both eyes, Astrid notices, despite a set of gashes very close to the left one, and briefly regrets that the dragon-boy hadn't been a little more accurate or ruthless â€" it would be _so_ much easier to avoid Snotlout if he had a blind side. As it is, she manages to pretend she doesn't hear his shout of "Hey Astrid!"

It shouldn't be that hard to find someone as tall as Stoick the Vast, but Berk's Vikings run to _big_. Astrid herself is comparatively small but she doesn't need to be approaching seven feet tall to lead (or, for now, be a very good deputy). Still, she must admit, if only to herself, that _she_ will never be able to prop back up, all on her own, one of the battle torches that stand throughout the village and

light up the sky when the dragons come after dark or before dawn, which is what she finds Stoick doing when she does track him down.

"Ah! Astrid! Good," he booms, seeing her. "Walk with me."

As soon as they're out of earshot, he drops a huge and heavy hand on her shoulder and asks, "Did you find them?"

She nods. "You know that sea cave on the western shore that Snotlout and the twins found last summer? The one they nearly broke all their necks trying to get to?"

"I often wish they'd succeeded."

Astrid knows better than to ask what Stoick wished they'd succeeded at, the getting to the cave or the neck breaking. "I think that's where they've gone. Just because Snotlout couldn't get to it doesn't mean a dragon couldn't. The Night Fury was dozing on the shore when I found it â€" its wing is definitely broken, but it's been splinted â€" and I think its rider was on its back, too."

"You saw him?" Stoick says urgently. "Hiccup? He's still with the dragon?"

"I saw the boy," Astrid temporizes. "Chief, surely you don't think thatâ€|do you really think that boy is your son? The one that dragons killed when he was a baby?" Stoick has gone silent and cold as they walk, but he didn't take her on as his heir because she was afraid to ask hard questions. "Chiefâ€|you know there's just no way, right?"

For a minute she thinks she might actually have gone too far, but then he rumbles, "I know it's unlikely. I want to think my son might have survived, that he might have grown up, butâ€|I gave him and his mother up for dead a long time ago. Still, I have to know. I have to see him in the light. I'm going to the western shore. The village can do without us for an hour or so. Are you coming?"

The cowardly part of her mind starts screaming about that Fury! again, but she stomps it silent and keeps her oath. "Yes, sir. There's a shortcut. I'll show you. We canâ€|wait a secondâ€"

Astrid dives for a stack of half-empty barrels nearby, knocking them flying. She gets hold of a hank of ratty blonde hair almost by accident and pulls on it hard, dragging Ruffnut out of concealment. Her other hand misses Tuffnut, who tries to bolt as if thinking he might get away with it, but one of the flyaway barrels lands squarely on his shoulders and drives him firmly to the ground, groaning more in disappointment at the failure of his grand escape than any pain.

She decides she meant to do that.

"You two! What are you doing here?" Stoick demands angrily, hauling Tuffnut up from underneath the barrel and relieving Astrid of her handful of Ruffnut hair. He grabs them both by the back of their tunics and lifts them so that only the ends of their toes touch the ground. Otherwise they'll just try to make a break for it despite the

fact that they've clearly been caught eavesdropping.

"You had a son?" says Ruffnut, who has no survival instinct whatsoever.

"Weird," her brother, who also has a death wish, backs her up. It's a minor miracle they're both still alive. Personally, Astrid thinks that if they walked off a cliff, they'd be too dumb to hit the ground. "How'd your son turn into a crazy dragon boy?"

"Cool! I want to be a crazy dragon boy!" Ruffnut yells.

"Don't be stupid," Tuffnut objects. "You can't be a crazy dragon boy, you're a girl. Probably. You can be crazy, though. Pretty good at it already."

"Yeah! Hey wait! Am not! You're crazy!"

"Am not!"

"Are so!"

They prove their own points by trying to attack each other despite the tightening grip on the back of their shirts, completely oblivious to the shade of red Stoick is turning, which is gradually matching his beard.

"Enough!" he roars, shaking them both equally. "Didn't Gobber find you something to do?"

They look completely " and identically " blank, a look they've been cultivating since birth.

"Well, now he's going to," Stoick declares, and starts marching them back down towards the village proper. They bicker the whole way there that Gobber doesn't like them, and of course he doesn't, who'd like you, and Gobber was boring, and so on, and so forth.

"Or you could drop them in the well," Astrid suggests, grinning, recalling the little boy earlier.

Stoick stops midstride, looks down at her over Tuffnut's head, and says, "That is an excellent idea."

And he does.

The twins scream with rage until they discover that the rock walls make their voices echo interestingly. Then they just scream.

The noise draws Gobber's attention. Everyone else looks up, registers twins, and moves on. "Been lookin' for those two," he says, hobbling over to the lip of the well and nodding approvingly at the sight. The screaming twins scream at him.

"Don't let them out until I get back."

"Fine by me."

* * *

><p>Astrid starts laughing the moment they're outside the village and no one is watching. It distracts her from the continuing wail in the back of her mind that every step is taking her closer to that blast of heat and fire and sparks, so it takes her almost halfway to the western shore to stop snickering. When she is chief, someday in the distant future, the twins will be spending a lot of time in the well.<p>

* * *

><p>They approach the inlet as silently as possible. Stoick is remarkably stealthy for a man of his bulk â€" privately, he has told her that it helps him sneak up on and unexpectedly loom over people who are complaining about him. He might have been just a little bit drunk at the time, but Astrid is an excellent hunter and she has already added that ability to her list of chiefly qualities that she wants to embody one day.<p>

With gestures, she draws his attention to the vaporized blast area. I was there, she mouths, jabbing a thumb at herself, pointing at the scorch marks and chips of stone, and looking alarmed. His eyebrows go up, and his lips purse in a silent whistle.

They find a different vantage point and watch the shoreline.

The black dragon is nowhere to be seen, and Astrid wonders if the odd pair has been flushed out by her earlier appearance and has gone to find another hiding spot. It's what she would have done.

It's mid-afternoon, and the tide is going out, leaving a variety of tide pools and isolated puddles of seawater and shore dwelling creatures concealed amid the rocks exposed by the receding water. None of them are big enough to hide a dragon the size of that Night Fury.

Stoick spots him first. Close enough in to the cliff face that he's half-concealed in its shadow, the dragon-boy is crouched at the edge of a tide pool, still as stone. With his face partly turned away from them, he blends into the shadows in his black scales and dark leather and brownish shock of hair.

Most people would be sitting or kneeling, keeping their hands free, but the boy is poised as if to leap or pounce, legs curled up under him and right hand down for balance. The only reason his left isn't similarly braced is because it holds a knife.

He is ready to pounce, and does, stabbing the blade into the tide pool in a single fast and efficient strike and twisting something â€" it's impossible to tell what at this distance â€" out of the water. Whatever it is that's impaled on the blade goes straight into his mouth, freeing up the knife for another strike.

The boy is too preoccupied by whatever he's eating to notice them, but he can afford to let his guard down, the two Vikings realize a moment later â€" he's not alone.

A dragon's warning screech splits the air, and the dragon-boy comes to attention, twisting around to look for the threat. The knife vanishes into a sheath incorporated into the armor protecting his right forearm, and his head and shoulders come up, but he keeps that

one hand close to the ground as he pivots in place instead of rising and preparing to run or fight the way a human would.

The Vikings can see him, but he can't see them, and his distress and fear are obvious as he casts about for the threat, mouth opening to simultaneously bare his teeth and voice his own scream of warning. As he does so, repeatedly crying out a harsh and threatening sound that somewhat resembles the dragon's howl, he comes partway to his feet and backs away towards the cliff. This frees up his hands to pull on those dragon-claw gauntlets he used so effectively last night, and he curls the claws in towards his palms as if testing them.

Part of the way up the cliff, far too high to climb from below but completely inaccessible from above, as Snotlout and the twins had found out last year, the Night Fury comes into view. It starts scrambling down that treacherous rock face, agilely despite the broken and bound wing, to retrieve or defend its companion.

Before it can get all the way down, Stoick steps out into view.

They both freeze, staring; the Night Fury still halfway up the cliff and the boy in the shadows below it.

From the undergrowth, Astrid gapes at him. Had he not seen the scorched and broken wreckage where she'd just now told him the black dragon had tried to blast her into ashes for looking at it wrong?

Stoick raises his hands to show that they are empty, and stops at the edge of the shoreline. "Hiccup?" he calls out. Through a very great effort of will, he keeps his eyes on the boy on the ground and not the dragon, which is continuing its descent very slowly. He thinks it might be trying to get to the boy without making any sudden and alarming moves, which is odd, because that's exactly what Stoick is trying to do.

(Astrid should go with him. She should back him up, watch his surroundings while he focuses on the dragon-boy, defend him, support her chief and mentor.)

(She does none of these things, fixated on the black reptile slinking down the cliff like a shadow. The taste in the back of her throat, she realizes, is terror; the phantom smell in her nose the fireblast from earlier. Astrid isn't running, she swore an oath—but for the life of her, she cannot get any closer.)

"I know you don't remember me," Stoick is saying, "but it's all right. I'm not going to hurt you."

The boy audibly growls across the distance between them, baring his teeth and lowering his head defensively as if planning to charge or expecting to be jumped on.

(Astrid's not sure whether he's trembling or she is. She desperately hopes it's the boy.)

The chief is still talking, in the low voice he'd use to head off someone gone battle-mad even when the battle is over. "Are you Hiccup?" he asks, and then, taking one step closer, "Are you Valka's son?"

The boy backs away, and runs, scrambling up the cliff side and making an impossible leap to a rock nearly on the level of his head. Dragon-claws dig into the stone and he drags himself up onto it, fleeing from there directly to the back of the Night Fury, which whirls around and takes off back up the cliff, setting off a minor avalanche in its wake. They're ahead of it " they don't care.

Dragon and boy vanish over the lip of the ledge and, presumably, into the cave that the twins and Snotlout saw but never got to.

Silence, except for the waves and the wind, falls.

Stoick breaks it with a curse, and drops his hands. A second later, as if he'd been waiting for the Viking chief to give up, the dragon-boy's head and shoulders appear at the edge, claws gripping the stone tightly and leaving little scratches. He hunches his shoulders defensively, bares his teeth in a gaping snarl, and screams, raucous, angry, frightened, and completely inhuman.

He retreats from the Vikings' line of sight again before the echoes have died down.

* * *

><p>They head back the way they came, Astrid desperately hoping the chief hadn't noticed her paralysis back at the shore. She is ashamed, truly and passionately humiliated in her own eyes, which is worse than almost anything.

"Was it him?" she finally asks, cautiously.

Stoick walks on in silence for several more steps. "I don't know," he finally says grimly.

"Chief," Astrid says tentatively, "even if that was, at some point, your son"it's not anymore. That's an animal. It's a dragon."

He says nothing.

But Astrid desperately wants that dragon gone, so she persists, saying, "Chief, whoever the boy is, that dragon is dangerous. We should drive it out and shoot it down for good while we still have a chance."

"No!" her mentor rejects this instantly.

"But sir " "

He stops walking and turns to face her, holding one hand up to forestall her objections. "It has nothing to do with the fact that I still think that might be my son Hiccup, and that in an assault on that dragon he would almost certainly be hurt or killed. But even if he isn't " think about it, Astrid. He can communicate with dragons. He can control them. He's got that Night Fury eating out of the palm of his hand! Can you imagine how much of an advantage we would have if we could get hold of someone like him? If he could order the dragons that have been attacking us for longer than anyone can remember to stop? If he could find out where the nest is?"

Her eyes must be huge. She hadn't thought of that. She was too afraid to " Astrid is disgraced all over again. She will never live down the shame her fear of that Night Fury has incurred. The dishonor of it will stick to her for the rest of her life if she doesn't find a way to think through it.

"You're right," she says, because he is. "I should have thought of that. I'm sorry."

Stoick chuckles, and they resume their journey back to the village. "It's all right, Astrid," he replies. "You think to defend your people first, to keep them safe at all costs. That's a noble way to think and the mark of a great chief. In any other circumstances, you would be completely right."

His praise only rubs in the shame she feels at her fear.

Astrid is humiliated.

* * *

><p>She can't live like this. She can't live with the disgust she feels at herself.<p>

At this point, the dishonor may be greater than the fear. She has to do something about it. It won't even be dark for hours yet on the same day she ran from the dragon, and the humiliation is eating her alive.

And no one else even knows.

She tells Gobber he can let the twins out of the well, but it's not funny anymore. She actually yells at Snotlout before he's even said more than "Hey " , which is pretty much how Snotlout starts all his sentences addressed to her. She steps in to mediate a dispute between two sisters but forgets what they're arguing about even as they try to explain. She's too busy kicking herself to focus.

Astrid has to overcome the fear she feels. She has to do it now, before she no longer deserves to be the chief's heir.

(Rationally, she knows that everyone is afraid of something, and every leader has a bad day. But her honor demands she be as good at it as possible " Stoick chose her over his own nephew, who, fair enough, is a self-centered jerk who is only less dumb than the twins because the twins' dumbness is automatically doubled, but he is Stoick's own blood " and she is letting herself, him, and the whole village down.)

If she could just go back there, she decides, if she could walk on that beach and look at the places where the Night Fury and its wild boy are likely to be and not freeze, not run " surely that will mean she's not afraid anymore? Or at least that she can work through the fear, which is all that matters?

She needs a reason to go back.

Astrid decides that she will map that area of the shore and its surroundings, just in case they do have to stage an attack on it at

some point. That makes good strategic and tactical sense. There's no point having an area of Berk they don't know how to defend, whether or not they use the knowledge to confront the Night Fury and its boy. A map of it would be good to have. It would help her tribe.

Anyway, it would probably be good to observe the thing and know where it goes. If it's ready to fly again, she wants to know in advance. They need to know the area. They really do.

She gathers up a large piece of paper, puts a conveniently-sized stick into the nearest fire for a moment, and commands her feet to take her to the shoreline.

They don't want to obey, but she forces them to go, counting off steps and focusing on her count rather than the destination, all the way back.

When she gets there, she knows no amount of counting will get her feet out into the gritty, rocky sand, which is steadily being eaten up as the tide comes in.

That flat rock, she decides, picking one well above the tide line. _I will go to that rock right now._

She does. It's one of the worst things she's ever had to do. She'd rather be back in the ring during her training days, on one of the days where Gobber thought it was a good idea to give them all tree branches, or pots and pans, or nothing at all, and set something large, nasty, and angry loose on them.

The rock is also very close to the cliff wall, putting her back against it. That has nothing to do with her choice of vantage point.

Astrid puts her piece of paper on the rock in front of her and begins to sketch out the area, roughly.

Very roughly â€" she has to erase her lines a number of times because they don't look anything like either the shoreline or a stylized map of it.

The fear she's facing just by being here and the frustration of not being able to get the lines to do what she wants to makes the fine hairs on the back of her neck stand up. She can't get over the feeling that she's being _watched_.

Succumbing briefly, she looks up, craning her head around to make sure that dragon hasn't snuck up on her. Surely it's too big to do soâ€|but then, a number of people would say the same thing about Stoickâ€|

She doesn't see anything, so she goes back to mapping.

The feeling returns a few minutes later as she rubs out yet _another_ meaningless line. How do people do this?

This time when she looks up she thinks she catches a glimpse of movement in the tumble of rocks on her left, a body-length or so above her head. But she stares in its direction, and nothing else moves. It might just have been a lizard â€" a proper small one, not a

dragon " or the sea wind.

Or maybe not!

Deliberately, Astrid lowers her head over her utterly useless map, which she has to admit is not worthy of the name, but watches out of the corner of her eye and listens closely.

Skritch tic-tic skritch, she hears, like scraping on rock.

She pretends to draw on the paper.

After a minute or so of 'drawing' she sees movement in the corner of her eye, up in those fallen rocks. It's too small to be the dragon, though.

A minute later she clearly sees the dragon-boy's head come up over the rocks, staring at her.

She can't resist looking up, and actually makes eye contact for a second, catching him by surprise.

The boy ducks behind his rock again, and bolts, heading for a different hiding place. Astrid catches a glimpse of him as he moves, animal-like and on all fours. His hands are as dark as the rest of his coverings, and she realizes that the _tic-tic_ noise was coming from his dragon-claw gauntlets, protecting his palms and giving him a better grip on the rocks. The _skritch_ing was probably the scales on his armor, which was why he had sounded like a dragon even when he moved.

When she bends over the paper and waves the stick over it as if busy again, she sees him emerge very slightly from a new vantage point. But he's definitely watching her.

Still, even though he hasn't gone on the offensive, it's not making her mapping any easier. The fear she feels of his Night Fury companion is still reverberating through her, and the dragon-boy's eyes on her are just another source of tension.

Astrid tries to go back to mapping for real. After a few more minutes, she knows she's not going to get anywhere. She thinks she's somehow rubbed out more marks than she's put on the paper, although how that could be possible considering that it was blank when she'd started she isn't sure. It makes about as much sense as her map.

On impulse, she crumples up the blank-again paper and throws it away from her along the beach, well ahead of the incoming tide.

To her shock, the dragon-boy suddenly pops up from behind the rock he'd ended up at, placing his claw-gloved hands on the top of it and staring after the flying piece of paper with obvious interest. He's all but vibrating with it, teeth chattering and making little noises through them like a cat that's just seen a bird.

He leaps onto the rock and slinks down across it, moving in fits and starts towards the beach and abruptly completely ignoring her.

Fascinated " more fascinated than her fear " Astrid watches him

go.

The dragon-boy is moving cautiously but quickly, stopping to check out the area and then making abrupt leaps and shifts. When he gets to more level ground, he almost stays on all fours, crouching and staying low to the ground.

She suddenly recognizes the pattern of movement and realizes that he is _stalking _her crumpled piece of paper. He's gone totally silent, as if it might hear him coming. When the wind moves it, he freezes and watches it intently. When it's still, he creeps towards it as if trying to take it by surprise.

Between the way he moves, the fin on his back, the scales on his armor, the claws on his hands, and the sheer _intensity_, he really does seem to be a dragon.

Astrid knows the black dragon could very well be creeping up on her as she stares, but even that is not enough to make her take her eyes off the incredible spectacle of a dragon-boy hunting a piece of paper.

He chases it all the way down the beach as if it might spot him and bolt at any moment. She doesn't need words to know that he really, really wants it, although she has no idea why. Surely he knows it's not edible or dangerous? He'd been watching her work on it for a while, she knows.

Suddenly he pounces, coming down on the crumpled ball with those sharp claws wrapped around it and kicking up sand in all directions.

Craning his head up and arching his neck, he peers at the paper in his hands and makes a chirping noise that's too happy not to be contagious. Astrid actually smiles, even though her mouth is still half-open in bafflement. The dragon-boy rolls onto the sand on his back and admires his catch, wriggling joyfully. Then he rolls back onto his stomach, kicks his feet up like any child, and flattens it out to look at it.

He gets about halfway before remembering she's there. His head snaps up, hair flying in all directions, and he stares back at her.

Astrid doesn't move.

The dragon-boy does, crumpling the paper back up and sidling away towards the rock fall that she guesses must be his way back up to the cave.

She's right, although she couldn't have made that climb and doesn't know anyone who could, especially with a piece of paper in one hand. Actually, about halfway up, he snaps a corner of it into his mouth and carries it the rest of the way up like that.

When he vanishes onto the ledge, out of her view, Astrid _has _to see the rest of this. She leaves her drawing rock without hesitation and is very pleased that she's just spent the evening mapping the area, because she knows immediately that if she climbs _that_ tree very recklessly and distributes her weight _very_ carefully between its uppermost branches and _stretches_ she _might_ be able to see into

the cave, or at least the lip of rock outside.

She drops her charred stick, evaluates her target branch for a moment, and sheds her armor and belt knife as well to reduce her weight. And then she climbs.

A few nervous near-misses later " this was easier when she was a little kid! " she can barely see the entrance to the cave.

Astrid's jaw nearly drops all over again. The dragon-boy is lying on the rocks outside it, nestled comfortably in a crouch between the front paws of his dragon-companion, who is looming over him watching him _draw_.

When the wind off the sea changes she thinks she can hear the boy humming to himself, a low vibrating purr with occasional chirps mixed in.

He can _draw_. She can't see what's he's drawing at this range, but his movements and focus on the paper are obvious. And even if he's just imitating her " but she's willing to bet he's not. His attitude is too sure of himself, completely at ease as he works.

They're perceptive, though " to Astrid's horror, the Night Fury looks up and sees her.

She stares back at it. She couldn't move if she wanted to " if she does the branches will break and she's going to fall out of this tree.

After a moment the dragon-boy follows the Night Fury's attention and sees her too. _His_ reaction is to sit up partway so he's sitting on his knees with his hands on the ground in front of him " she's fairly certain he usually does that. The exception, she learns quickly, is that he glances down at the paper in front of him, back at her, back at the paper, and then snatches it up in both hands and clasps it to his chest.

Even from this distance, she can hear him squawk as if he thinks she's going to come up there and try to take it back.

She doesn't try, and after a second he relaxes, crouches down again, and returns to drawing.

The Night Fury eyes her for a little longer before also turning its attention away, resting its head on the boy's shoulder lightly. In response, she sees the boy twist his head sideways to rub his cheek against its face.

Before it gets too dark to do so safely, Astrid carefully climbs back down out of the tree with her honor restored. She can come to the dragon's beach without freezing in fear. She has sort of interacted with its boy without him screaming at her and running away in fear. And she has learned a valuable piece of information that might just give them a way to communicate with him.

She is no longer ashamed of herself. She might even be proud of today.

* * *

><p>To be continued.

4. Chapter 4

ON WITH THE SHOW!

**Nightfall****, Part Four**

Although â€" perhaps because â€" Hiccup has ready access to fire, he does not use it in an organized fashion. He cannot cultivate and feed a flame or build a fire pit. He does not know how to start a fire from sparks. He has never needed to; Toothless is half of himself, when would Toothless ever not be there? It would not occur to Hiccup to light a fire for warmth, not when he has slept from a very young age in caves full of dragons, in the same nest as the heat-generating black dragon and under his wing when the other dragon outgrew him enough that he could do so. Likewise he does not use it to protect himself â€" while he is aware that he cannot breathe fire like his nest-mates, he has accepted it as just another peculiarity of the type of dragon he is, like his paws. And he would not think to start a fire to see after the sun goes down; experience has adapted his eyes to exploit levels of darkness that would leave a human blind. He can hunt and move around using nothing more than starlight and sound.

Their limited range and the restriction to hunting on land or at the water's edge mean that, for now, Hiccup and Toothless must forage essentially all the time, day or night. They are hungry, and they will probably be hungry until they can fly again and are not trapped in a single place and they can hunt properly. They're accustomed to it, really â€" dragons take a lot of feeding.

Until Toothless catches him doing it, Hiccup makes sure that anything substantial they catch or fish out of the water goes to his dragon-half, deliberately acting that he is catching more than he is and giving the fish that he actually does have to Toothless, letting the darkness hide his deception.

Hurting you hurting you fish! Hiccup protests when the black dragon cuffs him into the wet sand and screams at him, having caught on to the ruse. _Fish fish fish you!_ he insists.

Toothless thumps him again roughly when he tries to come back up to his paws, snarling and keeping him on his back. Before the dragon-boy can get his wind back, the black dragon picks up a fish and drops it squarely on his face.

You you fish! Toothless retorts.

Hiccup shakes it off without trying to get up, refusing to eat it as Toothless-_beloved_ clearly wants him to. _Hurting you fish good love you fish fish you love love_.

Toothless growls.

Fish you fish, Hiccup reiterates stubbornly, growling back and

refusing to back down despite the fact that he's flat on the ground and his stomach has chosen that moment to make a hungry noise. He is hungry, but he can scavenge and eat things that Toothless cannot, and Toothless is hurt and needs the food to heal properly. When Toothless heals, they can leave and be safe and in the sky again. Toothless can carry him if he is too hungry to fly, but he cannot carry Toothless if he doesn't heal. He hasn't done the math â€" Hiccup's concept of numbers runs to the singular this/me/you, the plural us, and the superplural many â€" but he can think about the future and understands the give-and-take of getting there.

You fish, he insists. Fish you fish better good flying flying no here nest safe go good good good, and, a whistle, now!

Toothless eats the disputed fish, but he grumbles the whole time about stupid you hatchling little you stupid stupid you fish fish you stupid, with a reckless or so thrown in there for emphasis.

Magnanimous in victory, Hiccup croons love love love you love and manages to get all the way up off the sand to press close to his dragon-love and nuzzle along his side.

The other dragon manages to drop a scrap of fish into his mouth when he opens it to make a particular crooning sound and then laughs at him smugly.

Hiccup houghs and eats the bit of fish. But he still makes sure most of his catch goes to Toothless.

* * *

><p>The dragon and the dragon-boy who are two halves of a whole do not exactly have a sleep schedule. They sleep when they are tired and relatively certain they are safe and nothing will ambush them in their sleep, except hatchling nest-mates, who are not dangerous. They eat when they are hungry and they can find food to eat. Whether it is dark outside or the sun is up does not particularly matter to them.<p>

When they have woken and talked to and groomed each other, and Toothless' wounds have been checked, they emerge from their cave to check their area for threats or possible food. They do so to a miraculous sight illuminated by midmorning sun.

Weighted down by a rock on the beach, well out of range of the tide or sea spray, is an entire stack of large pieces of paper.

Hiccup stares in shock, softly and spontaneously yelping to himself/Toothless equally. He loves to draw â€" their nest back at home is covered in designs that he's added to the rock in chalk and charcoal. He draws incessantly, because it makes him happy and it helps him think about things he doesn't have words for â€" he drew his scale-skins and his wings before he made them â€" and his nest-mates like to see him do it. His decorations and designs are slowly spreading throughout the network of caves. They get rubbed out quite often as dragon-scales brush against the stone, water from dragons who have been in the ocean is tracked in, or fire is blown and the patterns are charred away, but he doesn't mind, because it

means he gets to do it all again. He makes patterns that look like things and patterns that look like feelings and patterns that look like nest-mates. He doesn't remember learning to do so â€" it's too far back and happened to someone who was something else. He doesn't know this either; he draws as instinctively as his dragon-kin breathe fire.

The walls of their sea-cave here have already acquired some absent-minded sketches in charcoal from a Toothless-charred stick and a chalk from rocks found on the shore, and the paper he hunted away from the _she threat stalking_ just last night is covered in small drawings of his thoughts that are rapidly using up both sides. Hiccup has learned to use the space he has effectively, and he's as observant of his surroundings as any hunter and forager. Toothless features predominantly, quite lifelike, because Toothless is as much part of his thoughts as â€" and synonymous with â€" his concept of _me_.

Once, he found â€" well, stole â€" some crude paints. They were his favorite toy _ever_ until he ran out, which happened quite quickly, and then he spent a considerable amount of time trying to make new ones out of things. The results were even cruder than the originals but he loves them, and some of the more permanent designs scattered around their island nest-home and many of the ones he has put onto paper â€" he hoards those drawings carefully and treasures them â€" have colors added to them.

He has never seen so much paper in one place before. Usually he steals it a page at a time on raids or, occasionally, when his kin find shipwrecks and come to tell him so he can take it apart for what he wants. Shipwrecks are good, except for the one that had still had _pfikingr_ in it yelling one of the few Norse words he recognizes as meaning himself and his Toothless-half and their nest-mates. He would mispronounce it "drakkkn", but he knows what it means. They had screamed loud angry _pfikingr_ sounds at him and their long-claws had tried to cut him so he had shrieked back at them and flown away. Paper, he has learned, burns so easily, but it dries out well enough.

Hiccup is overwhelmed. _Paper paper paper paper paper_, he hums, stunned. He doesn't have a concept for this much paper all at once. He only has a word for paper because he'd invented it. His kin didn't need a sound for it â€" it didn't interest them. But the way he talks about paper has spread to the rest of his kin and now they all know what he means when he or someone else uses the sound. (His word for it is actually fairly close, by sheer chance â€" a stuttering purring noise that comes out as _pprr pprr pprr pprr_. Hiccup does not know this.)

It's simply too good to be true, and he crouches at the lip of the cave and stares, too wary and cautious to approach something new and different and unfamiliar without making very sure first it's not a threat.

Confused paper confused confused paper look you you? he whimpers.

Toothless stands over him protectively and follows his gaze, rumbling. The paper on the beach has upset his Hiccup-_beloved_ and so he doesn't like it. _Careful watch careful trap slow_, he

warns.

Trap paper trap? Hiccup wonders aloud. He thinks about it, vocalizing _trap trap rage hate trap fear trap fear pain trap_. He hates dragon traps; when he was a little hatchling who couldn't fly yet he had stepped into a rope one and been caught. His screams of outright terror and indignation had drawn his entire flock to him: the ropes had been torn open and the outraged dragon-boy released, but there are other and bitier traps out there that he has seen and in many cases rescued his kin from " his nest-mates love his clever paws " so he is afraid of them.

The other dragon sniffs the air, and senses _she threat hunt stalk_.

Hiccup is utterly _heartbroken_, frustrated and upset. _Paper paper trap sa-a-a-a-a-d want no want trap paper bad angry trap bite hurt paper threat sad sad trap want want bad no no no,_ he cries, a mixture of distressed noises and body language and gestures. Howling his unhappiness and disappointment, he crouches on the shelf outside the cave the same way Toothless does and puts his jaw on the rock between his front paws. _Sa-a-a-a-a-d_, the dragon-boy wails quietly.

Toothless curls around him and grooms him comfortingly, purring _safe safe happy love you me love safe us good good calm love_. Before very long Hiccup is grooming him back, scratching soft-claws under flying-with and nuzzling against the soft spots under the other dragon's jaw and along his neck, thrumming his own love and devotion to his other half. He only casts a few regretful glances over at the amazing stack of paper, but Toothless catches him at it.

Trap bad no no! the black dragon commands him.

Yes yes me good careful promise yes, Hiccup croons, rolling on to his back right under the bigger dragon's jaws and baring his throat in surrender and submission, proving with his absolute trust that he believes what Toothless says to him.

When Toothless lowers his jaw to the vulnerable dragon-boy beneath him, it's an affectionate lick and not a reproving bite, so Hiccup coils back to a crouch, rubs his cheek against Toothless' own, and purrs adoringly.

Love you love you love you, he's saying. _You me us good safe._

Once he knows he _can't_ have something he wants, Hiccup moves on, because sulking is not a survival skill. This is entirely different from wanting things that he _doesn't_ have, like his wings. One is a problem to be solved, the other is something he can't change.

He wants the paper, but he can't have it, because it's probably a trap " why _else_ would there be paper that smells like the _she threat_ from the day before there?

He wants food. That can be arranged. Food gets priority; the paper gets ignored.

The wind catches his wings as Toothless urges him over the edge and

he forgets his disappointment in the rush of _flying flying flying happy good flying_, he chirps into the air as he banks and spins, catching an updraft for a brief joyous moment that brings him all the way to level with the cave again " he folds a wing momentarily to turn in midair and whistles _up up up_ to Toothless, who grins a dragon's grin at him " and then dives out of it, pulling up just in time to avoid a hard flat water landing and settling into the water almost gracefully.

He's never quite managed to master the direct sharp dive from air into water that is one of the ways that Toothless fishes when they find a whole school close to the surface, although Hiccup flies with him in that maneuver all the time. Until he knows the waters in this inlet better he's not going to risk trying it out here. There could be rocks he doesn't know about " there often are.

In case he needs to dive from sky to water here in the future - _fear flee water dive water safe? water dive water flee scared_, he vocalizes to himself " he gulps in air and submerges, creating a mental map of the water's currents and upwells and undertows and landscape the same way he would the same features and landmarks in the air. He comes up again with a better idea of the area and a large nearly-dead fish that he promptly transfers to his mouth so he can use his paws for swimming. It flails weakly and he bites down into it until it stops without thinking about it, heading back in to the shore where Toothless-_love_ has arrived.

Hiccup insists " successfully " that Toothless eat the fish, demonstrating that he doesn't need it himself by digging for shellfish, which the black dragon does not have the patience to either find or eat.

He traces a wide arc around the stack of paper as he scavenges, clicking regretfully at it once. He does not know where the trap is set, only that there must be one. There is no other conceivable reason for it to be there; anything tempting that appears from nowhere and smells of _pfikingr_ has to be a trap. This evasive movement brings him to the scrubby forest edge, which might contain other things he could eat.

Prowling around one tree, something occurs to him. He looks up into it, and balances on his heels to push one paw against the trunk. The top of it sways when he pushes again harder, and he watches the pattern of the branches, noting a broken one, a scuff there, a crumpled clump of needles there, its position on the shore" He makes connections and forms wordless ideas.

Hiccup calls out his dragon-companion's name. He's missing some of the sounds that would belong in the full Norse version, and he does not readily combine vowel sounds and consonants in the same concept sound, which is why it emerges as a clicking, hissing "Tt-th-ss!" He deliberately adds the crooning tone that makes it the adoring _Toothless-love_.

Toothless follows his dragon-boy-half and twines around him, licking bits of fish from his own muzzle and then his Hiccup-_love_'s fur in a single motion and humming a wordless general questioning noise.

Up? Hiccup requests with a whistle. The bigger dragon lets him

climb onto his nose and rears up, broken wing trailing uncomfortably, boosting him up into the tree. Toothless then watches anxiously as the dragon-boy climbs further into it. The last time he saw Hiccup-_beloved_ climb a tree like this, he fell out of it.

The black dragon had been making playful little mock-attack swoops down at him at the time, and it had been a windy day, but Hiccup had simply unfolded his wings and Toothless had caught him long before he would have hit the ground anyway.

Still, Toothless knows he can't do the same here and now. He's grounded. He doesn't like having his other half out of his reach, and reminds the climbing dragon-boy of this in a mixture of low, liquid cries and chattering noises. The working wing flutters reflexively â€” he wants to leap into the air and go after his partner.

Hiccup, the more reckless of the pair, never worries about falling out or off of _anything_, and he climbs freely, testing his idea even as he chirps reassurance to Toothless on the ground below him. Before very long, he's reached the same branch that he thinks the _she threat_ might have been on last night, and discovered that he can see their sea-cave nest clearly.

Bad bad look she threat us safe no safe nest bad angry scared, he mutters and chirps, descending from branch to branch more quickly than he'd climbed. He's still vocalizing the same thought when he reaches a place where he has a clear leap from tree to ground, landing crouched and ready to take off again if he's alighted somewhere unexpectedly dangerous, front paws braced lightly on the ground.

This bad bad this bad angry hunt fight no she threat stalk, he growls to Toothless, half-rising and brushing against and around the tree that lets the _she threat_ watch them and shoving his shoulder against it, making angry sounds. He had been more interested in stealing the paper from the _she threat_ and as long as she had been relatively still and not directly trying to hurt them he had been content to avoid her. But seeing her appear in the top of the tree stalking them had frightened him, until he remembered that _pfikingr flying no_ and saw that she wasn't trying to take his paper away.

Hiccup has been stealing from Vikings for most of his life; as soon as he gets his paws on something he wants he considers it his.

She had gone away, so that was all right. He did not want her to come back but _she threat stalk trap hunt stalk no stalk trap angry_, he mutters.

Now Toothless flips his tail around and uses it to pull his dragon-boy, still making disgruntled noises, away from the objectionable tree. He purrs at Hiccup to quiet him, licks him thoroughly when that doesn't work at first, and then nuzzles him. Hiccup crowds in close to him, rubbing scales against scales and purring.

If his dragon-boy doesn't like this tree, then Toothless doesn't either. He slams his full weight into it and listens to the _crack!_ that results. The impact sends a shock through the broken bones in his off-side wing, but not too much pain, so he does it again. It

doesn't go down immediately but after a few more blows, a targeted blast of fire/power, and some industrious undermining of the roots the trunk snaps critically. It doesn't collapse completely, not all at once, but it does stagger and sag, top dropping quite a lot lower than it had been and becoming very unsafe to even _try_ climbing. Toothless wouldn't let his Hiccup-self up in that, and would carry him away by the scruff of his neck scolding him if he tried. That's surprisingly effective.

Fortunately, Hiccup shows no further desire to climb the tree. Instead he thrums adoringly at the black dragon and pets and caresses him affectionately, chirping gratitude and love.

As it happens, the broken trunk contains a squirrels' nest, which Toothless eats the blind and squirming contents of quite happily. Further scavenging among the wreckage reveals a dislodged bird's nest with eggs that Hiccup can eat, which he does, picking out woven-in feathers from the structure of the smashed nest, playing with the texture and admiring the colors of them. He puts them into his fur and whistle-chirps _bird bird me bird Hiccup bird_ and laughs, imitating the whistles and calls of birds and making little mock-leaps at Toothless, purring as the black dragon bats him around on the ground teasing _bird chase bird you bird chase love_. All in all, it's a successful effort, and dragon and dragon-boy are pleased with themselves and each other.

They lap up cold water from the snowmelt cataract that runs past their cave and down the cliff to the sea, splashing each other playfully in the process, and then Toothless curls up on the sand so that Hiccup-_beloved_ can check the splints on his wing, which he insists on doing, complaining _hurting you hurting bad bad hurting worry you love you us good we?_ anxiously as he does so.

He wants to bind the wing in close to the other dragon's body, keeping it still and in tight to reduce the shock from his movements. Hiccup does not have the vocabulary to explain this, so he draws what he wants to do in the sand to illustrate it to Toothless, asking _yes good you love yes no hurting better yes yes me you better love yes?_

The black dragon looks over his sketch and refuses. The broken wing is throwing his balance off but it would be worse if he couldn't even extend the wing, even if he can't move it properly, and trying to run or climb up to or down from their sea-cave with one wing bound up would be like flying in uncontrollable storm winds. _No no up go bad storm-air-warning moving flying this good no hurting good._

The dragon-boy tries to insist, yelping. The dragon huffs a breath at him and prods his chest with his nose, pushing him away from the drawing. He puts one front paw on it, scuffing it out. _No no no_, he says, but tempers it with _love you love you good you._

His other half forgives him their disagreement instantly, crooning loving sounds and scratching soft-claws under his jaw and rubbing their skins together soothingly, delighting in being with him. Toothless dozes off as his beloved-companion does so, knowing that Hiccup will keep watch and look after them.

* * *

><p>Satisfied as much as he can be with the condition of the wounds even if Toothless won't let him bind the wing the way he thinks it should be, Hiccup curls as far as he can fit into the space between the black dragon's front leg and his side, pressing his skull against Toothless' ribs and listening to his heartbeat. He purrs his devotion to his sleeping partner-love, thrumming deeply in his own chest and sending the vibrations through both their bodies.<p>

Even in his sleep Toothless hums back at him.

At ease in his own environment and with the dragon who is half of himself, Hiccup is content for the moment. It's a condition quickly spoiled when he spots movement in the forest.

The dragon-boy shifts attentively, tensing and raising his head to stare. His mouth half-opens in case he needs to scream a warning, but does not cry out yet.

The movement at the edge of the trees resolves itself into the _she threat_, who emerges into the open space tentatively, looking around.

Hiccup pays very close attention. She's upright and moving and he doesn't know what she'll do next.

The first thing she looks at, if he's following her gaze, is the stack of paper, which has remained undisturbed. She makes unhappy Viking noises and does something awkward with her front legs. For a moment she does nothing else at all, although the noises continue.

The _she threat_'s attention â€" and Hiccup's, watching both her and her likely focus â€" moves to the broken tree, which comes to her attention as a dislodged clump of needles blows across the gritty, rocky sand and brushes against her. Her mouth opens, without making Viking sounds or baring her teeth.

Then she makes more noises, none of which the dragon-boy understands. Her tone makes more sense to him, though â€" she sounds angry and maybe a little scared. Hiccup prepares to wake Toothless and run or fight, scratching soft-claws against his scales and making soft sounds of worry and possible distress.

When _pfikingr_ sound angry and scared they try to hurt dragons.

Toothless' green eyes open, but he does not move. Neither does the dragon-boy â€" if they stay still she might not see them and might go away again.

But she looks at them.

She threat she threat no bad scared no scared she threat angry, Hiccup snarls. Toothless growls, moves from sleeping-relaxed to awake-alert-crouch and begins to breathe in a whistling breath to blast her away, a noise that comforts the dragon-boy as much as it is meant to threaten an enemy.

The _she threat_ makes more Viking sounds and waves her paws in the air, staring at them and changing color. Hiccup bristles under the

stare, watching the paws for any sharp-claws that might suddenly appear in them, and continues to join his own growl to Toothless'.

She backs off under their display of power and danger, lowering her paws and stepping away. She keeps making noises, though. He doesn't recognize any of them until the one that sounds a bit like his name. It's not close enough for him to respond, though.

Then, to his surprise, she tries again, calling out sounds like the way the _St-t-t-t-t-kk_ had made them.

At that, Hiccup tips his head slightly to the side, interested. He whistles a small curious note under the burgeoning shriek still building in Toothless' throat. The black dragon hears him, though, relaxing slightly and letting the power return to the heart-fires in his chest.

Both sides are very quiet for a moment, evaluating and reevaluating each other. Hiccup hasn't moved far from his original spot on the ground, but he is sitting up as alertly as his dragon-self.

Recovering, the _she threat_ makes the sounds again, raising one paw â€" dragon and dragon-boy growl at it in unison â€" and extending it towards them.

A moment later, she brings the paw in to her own chest and makes a new noise.

Then she makes it again.

Toothless rumbles a question at the dragon-boy, no more than a vibration running through their hearts. For a moment, Hiccup stops staring at the _she threat_ â€" Toothless will watch her â€" and nuzzles in to his dragon-love's side reassuringly. _Calm wait wary wait peace calm careful,_ he hums to Toothless.

He turns his eyes back to the _she threat_, still staring at him. Hiccup works his jaw awkwardly, trying to imitate the noise. "Uh st-t-t-t-tt_," he gets out.

She sounds happy when she repeats the new noise, following it with more sounds he doesn't know and can't sort out.

Then she does a good thing.

Uh st-t-t-t-TT points at Toothless and makes a curious sound.

The dragon-boy perks up immediately and puts his paw on his dragon-love's nose, rattling "Tt-th-ss!" Then he hums _love happy love us we love_, nuzzling against the warm black scales of his side and neck and jaw and rubbing scale-skins together.

Toothless purrs back and licks his dragon-boy affectionately, returning the devotion and adoration.

They keep part of their attention on _Uh st-t-t-t-TT_ as they do so, of course. Just because she's not a threat right now doesn't mean she can't be so in the future.

She grimaces, trying to make the noises of the dragon's name and failing. Instead, she says something to them neither dragon nor boy understands, and backs away slowly. Moving to the paper " _trap trap bad trap angry sad_, Hiccup complains to Toothless as she does so " she picks up a single sheet from beneath the rock holding it in place.

Uh st-t-t-t-TT makes more noises and holds the paper out in front of her.

Paper worried worried she threat paper trap bad worried, Hiccup vocalizes suspiciously. Toothless shifts just a little bit on the gritty sand so he can curl his tail around, protectively, in front of the dragon-boy now crouched just off his right foreleg.

Us safe good us love, Toothless reassures him, touching his nose gently to Hiccup's side.

Still holding the paper, she takes another couple of slow steps forward towards them. The noises she is making are soft but still meaningless.

Another step, and she has gotten too close. The dragon-boy bristles, hunching his shoulders and baring his teeth, roaring a warning as he sets his front paws into the ground and moves so he can either pounce on to the attack or leap away in retreat if need be.

Toothless joins in, summoning up his heart-fire whistle and opening his jaws just far enough to reveal the brightening glow.

Immediately, _Uh st-t-t-t-TT_ crouches down to the sand, almost like one of their nest-mates who has lost a fight and is submitting to the winner. She puts the paper down, and then moves backwards without rising back to her paws and without taking her eyes off them. When she's gotten far enough away that Toothless has swallowed his fires again and Hiccup's growls can only be heard as a rumble through both their bodies, she sits back on her back feet in a crouch not unlike Hiccup's alert stance and points at the paper, and then at dragon and dragon-boy.

Paper, dragons. Dragons, paper. Paper, dragons" |

She backs away further, almost to the edge of the scrubby forest, and sits down differently, curling her back legs awkwardly. How could she possibly jump from" |?

A sea wind blows in, ruffling Hiccup's fur and the needles of the trees and the paper, which starts to blow away.

Want want want paper paper want yes trap? trap?

Toothless growls _careful trap careful me guard protect._

Gradually, Hiccup slinks towards the paper, one paw at a time, keeping a careful eye on the _Uh st-t-t-t-TT_ in case she tries to leap at him or pulls out a sharp thing.

She does neither, and he snatches up the paper and retreats to the

safety of his dragon-love's embrace, sending sand flying and pressing himself up against the black dragon as if frozen by the brief absence.

Hiccup buries his face in the bigger dragon's ribs and hides for a moment. The unbroken black wing comes up and folds over him.

When he comes out, the _Uh st-t-t-t-TT_ is still there, but she hasn't moved.

"Uh st-t-t-t-_tt_," he says at her.

She raises an empty paw again â€" he flinches away reflexively, but she points at the _trap trap bad_ _paper_. Except, Hiccup thinks, looking down at the piece still clutched in his pawâ€¦

The paw moves from the _trap trap bad_ _paper_ to the dragon-boy and his dragon; back to the paper; back to the dragons.

Tentatively, Hiccup lifts a paw at the _trap paper trap_, and puts it against his own chest and then Toothless' nose.

The _Uh st-t-t-t-TT_ makes a happy noise, waves both front paws up in the air above her head, unfolds her back legs, and gets up. She waves one paw in the air again, makes sounds that include the way she said his name earlier, and turns her back on them and goes away.

The dragon-boy stares after her for a while, pressed close against Toothless' heart-fires and trembling with tension and puzzlement.

Confused confused angry confused pfikingr bad trap no trap pfikingr paper trap angry us confused worried us scared bad want GO us! he howls and gestures finally, frustrated and baffled.

Toothless, who is equally confused and worried, can only croon reassurances of the total and unconditional love that they share â€" _us we love you me us we love love love us_ â€" to the dragon-boy who is part of him.

Love you love, Hiccup croons back at him. _Nest safe us nest go?_ He adds a dragonish sound for which there is no good single human concept, involving curling up in a nest together and being together and at peace, ideally in the dark and warm.

The dragon-boy scrambles onto the bigger dragon's back and they retreat to a safer place where there are no _pfikingr_.

But he takes the bit of paper with them.

* * *

><p>To be continued.

5. Chapter 5

ON WITH THE SHOW!

**Nightfall****, Part Five**

Astrid is having a crisis of faith.

It's nagging at her like an axe with a loose head. Every time she tries to use it, it wobbles. Because dragons are evil " they're malicious predators at best and utterly noxious parasites at worst, but

It loves him.

Astrid has never imagined that a dragon might care for and protect a human, even one who doesn't know he's human. Surely the creature can tell? He should smell like food to the thing, like an enemy. It must know!

And yet the way it had let the dragonish boy nuzzle against it, that it had returned the gesture; it had protected him, guarded him; that he could curl up in its paws and be so comfortable around it that he could do something as human as draw even as he petted a fire-blast-spitting monster while it breathed down his neck with its teeth right there it would only have to have flicked a claw and he would have been bleeding to death! But on the shore when he didn't dare approach her, he'd comforted it, and it had comforted him. He'd been so happy when she'd asked about it; she wonders if he knows how expressive his face is, even under all that ragged hair. Reconstructing the joy in his eyes as she considers it, she wonders, absently, if he really has that many freckles or if most of them are just dirt.

It loves him. It's unthinkable. It reverberates in her head like a broken axe in her hand.

She cannot reconcile that fact with what she has known for sure all her life, and yet she cannot deny it.

She cannot accept that the Night Fury " that tried to blast her to dust and ashes, that roars when she gets too close, that knocked over a tree because she'd climbed into it and seen it and its boy " could be the same as the creature that purrs and wraps the dragonish boy in its wing like a blanket and licks his hair like a kitten. Dragons aren't like that!

Either he'd done something to it, which would be a useful thing to know, or it had done something to him, which she would not put past a dragon.

Astrid wishes she could deal with the boy without the dragon, but they never seem to be far away from each other. She doesn't want to get anywhere near the dragon, but, for a number of reasons, she has already resolved to tame the boy. As she travels back to the village, she starts devising strategies to win his trust and figure out some way to talk to him, keeping an eye out all the while for Terrors, the nasty little lizard-like dragons that like to travel in groups. They're not particularly dangerous on their own, unless you happen to be a squirrel " or, she remembers, Tuffnut " but a flock can mob a human quite badly.

She doesn't actually care about the dragon-boy, not personally, she convinces herself, despite how different and sometimes amusing he is. The many times he's been terrifying or just dangerously impossible

have more than cancelled that out. Whether or not he's actually Stoick's lost son isn't particularly important to her, partly because it's so unlikely. Although, it's obvious to her that her mentor truly wishes it to be so, and she thinks he deserves to have his son back if it's possible. (She doesn't think it's possible, not now that she's seen the boy move and act as if he is and has only ever been and only ever will be a dragon.)

It's the potential he represents that interests her. Stoick was right â€" someone who could control dragons could save their battered tribe.

If she could control him, they could win the war.

It also means she will have to face the Night Fury on a regular basis. Astrid is still disgusted with herself for being afraid of it. She refuses to accept her fear the same way she refuses to accept the way the Night Fury fawns over the dragon-boy. Both are signs that something is truly and fundamentally wrong with her world.

The Viking woman lives in an environment where uncertainty and unpreparedness means injury, loss, or death. She has to be strong enough to lead these people someday. She has to protect them; it isn't what she was born to do, it's more than that. It's a duty she's earned. How can she do that â€" how can she be worthy of the trust they're all placing in her â€" if she's afraid of a single dragon?

Going back once was not enough, she realizes. When she slipped out this morning to set out her bait after all but tearing the village apart all over again to find that much paper, she had been relatively sure she wouldn't encounter the dragon â€" there wasn't much point in setting out bait if what you were hunting saw you do it, and it was a Night Fury, it had to be at least partly nocturnal, right? She'd known â€" almost â€" that it wouldn't be watching her, just waiting to scorch her out of existence without warning.

Astrid should feel better about facing it down when she'd tried to give the single piece of paper to the dragon-boy. She hadn't realized he'd be smart enough to know the stack of paper was bait and avoid it. Some hunter she was â€" she'd underestimated her quarry.

Except she knows that when she had heard that whine and seen the light of the Night Fury's fire crackling in its mouth up close, the only reason she hadn't run had been because she was too scared. She had frozen again as badly â€" worse! â€" than when she'd accompanied Stoick to see the impossible pair.

The fear and horror lurks in the back of her mind and the pit of her gut; the moment where her oath never again to run and her fright had combined into absolute panic mocks her. Astrid suspects that the only reason she's still alive is because â€" to her unconditional disgust and shame â€" she'd dodged as far as her oath would let her just before her knees had collapsed. She'd given her gods-sworn word not to run from the Night Fury, or any other dragon, ever again, but the only way she'd been able to hold her ground had been to crouch down and wait to die.

That she'd not only lived but discovered a new thing about communicating with the dragon-boy and demon dragon is, she is

convinced, the gods' way of amusing themselves with bitter irony.

She's not sure which of them to pin that on, but she has suspicions. Unfortunately, no one with any sense draws the attention of a trickster with a malicious sense of humor, so she swallows her curses and shoulders the blame herself.

She will not let them fly into her life and terrify her in ways she hasn't felt since she was a little girl watching the fires in the sky and hiding from the creature they heralded. Astrid is going to beat the monster and the monster's pet one way or another, and if her chief has ordered her not to fight that creature and its freak then there are other ways to bring down a dragon than hitting it with an axe.

It means facing them. It means communicating. If that's what her duty and the gods demand of her, then that is what Astrid, future chief and guardian of Berk, will do to gain a weapon that could save her people.

Rehearsing their names repeatedly in preparation, she tries to find a version she can pronounce without feeling like she isn't saying anything at all or choking on her own tongue. The boy does seem to respond to the sounds ick-phuh. She can see why Stoick so deeply wants to hear the name Hiccup in there. Most of the sounds are the same, it's just that his pronunciation is so bad. She wonders how he can make so many impossible sounds when he's talking to the dragon " or screaming at her " and not say words in a human language any better.

Maybe if she uses the name Hiccup to and about him often enough, he'll be willing to accept the Norse version and Astrid will feel less like she is trying to cough something tasteless up every time she says it.

The dragon's name gives her more trouble; it's all hisses and clicks, completely devoid of vowel sounds. She tries saying it as three distinct sounds, which is easier: tt, th, ss. That she can manage; it's the closest she can get. Astrid wonders what it means, or if it means anything, turning the noises over and over in her head until, by the time she gets back to the village, they have all blurred together in strange combinations, inextricably merged and refusing to separate into their component sounds no matter how much she tries to make them do so, and she feels as if her head is buzzing with dragon-sounds.

Wanting to replace them with some human voices, she follows the general movement of people up towards the Great Hall. She can hear Stoick holding court even before she climbs the steps to the wide-open door " now there's something she can't do. Astrid is envious of what she thinks of as his chieftain voice, which can be heard over a room full of arguing Vikings and silence them all with a single roar the equal of any dragon's.

Unsurprisingly, the meeting seems to be about the Night Fury lurking on their western shore. People have shown up for this meeting who never show up for clan meetings, ever.

She must have come in by the middle of the meeting; arguments and

sub-arguments are already breaking out among the edges of the tribe.

"I don't know who he is," Stoick bellows. He's gone so far as to stand on the seat of his great chair to see over everyone's heads as the unusually large crowd mills around. "He doesn't speak in a way that anyone understands. He could barely tell me his name, and I still don't know if I heard him right."

"But is it your _son?_" someone demands from the safety of the crowd.

"Are there others?" a woman calls out. Astrid recognizes her voice â€" her brother had been carried off by dragons and never seen again two years ago. Of course she wants to know.

"What's it doing here?" a third voice demands. "No one's _ever_ seen a Night Fury in the Archipelago before!"

"No one's seen any others," Stoick roars back over the growing din at the woman. "And when Astrid and I find _out_ what they're doing here, we'll tell you! Until then, _stay away_ from the western shore! _Understood_? I don't want anyone going anywhere near them without my express permission. And if anyone doesâ€|"

Stoick casts around for a satisfactory consequence, and finds one. "â€|I'll throw them in the well!"

There's some laughter, breaking the argumentative mood as the joke â€" if it is a joke, he may well mean it â€" spreads across the hall. Over it, Fishlegs calls, "You'll have to fish the twins out of it first!"

"I let them out," Astrid shouts to him, getting involved from her place at the back of the room â€" it hadn't been worth wading through the mob of oversized Vikings to join Stoick. He'd been holding the floor perfectly well on his own.

Fishlegs stands on his toes, trying to see her, and replies, "They're back in."

Stoick sighs as the room quiets down a bit â€" the Vikings of Berk can _smell_ a joke coming. "What did they do?" the chief asks resignedly.

"Nothingâ€|well, nothing in particular. I think they decided they liked it and jumped back in themselves. Who knows why the twins do anything?"

Laughter breaks out properly.

Because it causes the maximum amount of chaos and confusion, that's why, Astrid thinks but does not say. If they ever need proof that malicious trickster gods pay attention to Berk every so often, she will point to the twins.

A lesser man would bury his head in his hands â€" another perfectly good way of dealing with the twins foiled by their blockheaded inability to think past the moment! Stoick doesn't do so, but Astrid suspects he may have sagged a little.

A moment later, something occurs to him. "All rightâ€|anyone who goes near that beach, I'll throw them in the well _with the twins!_"

There's instantly a wholehearted and unanimous if piecemeal chorus of "Yes, Chief!"; "You got it!"; "Sounds good!"; "Off limits, yes sir!"; "Works for me!"

And similar sentiments.

Astrid listens to the rest of the meeting with the dragon-noises still bouncing around her head tumbling into each other like attacking Terrible Terrors. By the time most of the village has cleared out to go and do wherever and whatever they're planning to go and do, she's come up with something in Norse that's close to the sounds that the boy had made. It doesn't make any sense, but then neither do half the names around here.

Stoick has sat down on the edge of a fire pit with a tankard of ale, talking privately to the people who come to him looking for help, reassurance, permission, advice, or just a listening ear. When they've gone, she joins him and waits quietly as he drains the remainder of the ale.

"How did your bait work?" he asks her. She'd told him about her discovery last night as she was tearing around looking for people who would give her paper.

"Not the way I thought it would," Astrid admits. "He may not be able to talk, but he's intelligent. He knew it was bait, Chief. Avoided it completely." She relates the story of how she'd gotten the paper into his hands after all â€" partly.

She doesn't admit how frightened she was. That is her private shame. "I taught him my name. He can't say it right, but it was close enough that I think he was trying. He said it about the way he says yours. Ohâ€|and I think he might be calling the dragon _Toothless,_ " Astrid says thoughtfully, "as a name." If she assumes the sounds have a Norse origin the way Stoick thinks the sound _ick-phuh_ was originally _Hiccup_, it's the only word with all the right sounds that she can think of to run _tt-th-ss_ back to.

The chief makes a disbelieving sound. "Nonsense. That thing has plenty of teeth."

His deputy shrugs, a movement across the hall catching her eye. "Makes as much sense as 'Fishlegs'," she points out. "Fish don't even have legs."

That makes Stoick laugh just a bit. Viking names almost never make sense if they can help it.

"I want to try talking to him," Astrid tells him decisively. "I think I can do it. If I can get him used to me I might be able to teach him a few words, enough to get on with, anyway. All we really need is for him to understand that we want the dragons to go away. We already know he likes to draw and he likes paper. Maybe there are other things he wants and we can work out a trade." She gets more excited as she presents the plan she developed on the way here, hoping for

his approval. "I'm going to gather up some things from around the village and see what he reacts to."

Her mentor reminds her, fairly gently for such a large man who cares so intensely about what he's saying, "Not _all_, Astrid. Ending the attacks is important. Being able to use him could save a lot of our people's lives. But I need to know who he is—and where his mother is."

Stoick, at least, has decided for himself who the boy is.

"Yes, sir. Of course. I'll try to find that out too."

"Fine. I'll go with you."

"No," Astrid says before she thinks.

He turns a dark and glowering scowl on her that commands her to explain herself, _now_, and just in case she didn't get the message adds, "That could be my only son down there, Astrid, and I mean to get him back. Explain yourself."

"Um—you're too big," Astrid says reluctantly.

He repeats "Too big," as if he's never encountered the concept before. Maybe he hasn't — who tells a seven-foot-tall Viking warrior chief he's too big to do something he intends to?

"He was scared of me, or at least he and the dragon didn't want me to come too close. I guess I was threatening them. But once I sat down on the ground and I was smaller than him he wasn't as worried. And he approached me all on his own when I was sitting still and trying to draw my map, although I think he was more interested in the drawing than me. You're intimidating, Chief. Let me try."

Stoick doesn't like it, grumbling not unlike the dragon earlier.

"There is something you can do, though," she offers.

"Oh?"

"Can you draw it?"

"Draw what?"

"The dragon that took your wife and son. I know it was twenty years ago, but if you can remember and he recognizes it or even the species then we'll know it really is Hiccup."

"I've never forgotten a scale on that creature," Stoick says grimly. "I can certainly try."

* * *

><p>By the next morning Astrid has a large basket full of objects from around the village that she drags off down to the western shore to try out on the dragon-boy and his terrifying companion.<p>

She is gradually getting the idea that she is going to be very

familiar with this path.

The shoreline is devoid of dragons when she gets there, so she has plenty of space to spread her things around. Despite really, really wanting to, she has not brought any weapons. If the boy who might have once been named Hiccup is clever enough to spot a potential trap in a stack of paper, then he's definitely clever enough to recognize a weapon, and she has no desire to antagonize his dragon-shadow any more than she already has.

Speaking of—the paper is all gone.

"You did understand," Astrid says, satisfied. She hadn't liked not being able to communicate something as basic as the paper is for you.

Across the sand, she scatters things that might be interesting to a boy who has never really been human — Stoick had told her that his son had been barely six months old when he was taken. There's a small and only slightly warped glass bowl that she had had to beg to borrow (and she owes the owner at least one piece of information about the Night Fury and the boy that she has to tell her first!, which was the price of it for a single day. She suspects the price might go up the longer she retains the bowl).

She's brought a hairbrush from her own home — he's clearly never seen one — and a rope, and a toy cart with big wheels. She has two chicken eggs, and a piece of canvas left over from a new sail that was being made to replace one the dragons had burned a few days ago.

She'd found a completely shapeless lump of glass that is, for some reason, a bright clear blue. She's gone heavily for shiny things, including a bronze wrist cuff with a complex knotted pattern that must have been traded for or stolen — they don't make designs like that here.

Other things include a pair of boots (new-made, never-worn, and borrowed for the day), a small cauldron, a sheep-bladder ball that hasn't gone flat yet and that she borrowed from some children, two beeswax candles, and a whittled figure of a dragon. It's probably the only one in the village not depicted either in agonizing pain or obvious menace, which is why she'd brought it.

The small bundle left in the basket is her lunch, in case she's here all day — nothing more complicated than some bread and cheese and smoked meat, with a flask of clear water to wash out the sea air.

Astrid sets her back against the cliff face in the same place she'd tried to draw a map not long ago and sits down to wait, staring out to sea past her array of curiosities.

After almost an hour and a half she wonders if the boy and the dragon can be still asleep, or if they have slunk away in the night, or if the Night Fury's wing has suddenly and spontaneously healed and they've flown away back to whatever dark corner they came from to begin with. Or off the edge of the world. Whichever. She's patient and in good shape but at some point she's going to have to get up and stretch her legs.

As a prelude to such, she stretches out her legs, scooting away from the cliff a little bit so she can stretch her arms out behind her in turn and lean back.

Her eyes open halfway through this maneuver, as she's facing all but straight up, and to her _embarrassment_ she shrieks in sudden surprise.

The dragon-boy perched on the cliff face far above her tips his head curiously, perhaps because the noise she makes is closer to something a dragon might sound like than anything else he's heard her do.

"How long have you been there?" she demands, knowing even as she does that he doesn't understand the question.

He knows it's a question, though " his head tips the other way in response.

"Uh st-t-t-t-__tt,__" he says, and she recognizes the garbled version of her name he'd managed yesterday. Then his face moves in a way she doesn't understand " he opens his mouth and pushes his tongue half-out, keeping the tip of it behind his teeth, then follows it up with a mishmash of _quork_s and chattering noises.

Astrid suspects that he's laughing at her.

There's no good way to confirm that, and it wouldn't help if she did. Instead, she swallows her annoyance and presses a hand to her chest both to reinforce the meaning of the word and to catch her breath.

"Yes," she says clearly, and smiles, keeping her lips pressed together to avoid showing her teeth.

The dragon-boy whistles and croons a liquid and incomprehensible response at her. Then he sits back on his heels, raises his head, and shrieks something else. The maneuver looks terrifyingly precarious to Astrid, as the ledge he's balanced on is not very large and he's not holding on to anything beyond the gauntleted hands braced almost in the same space as his booted feet. She wonders where he got those, and then wonders where any of the armor had come from " had he made it?

He gets a reply almost instantly " a complementary sequence of cries from the general direction of the sea-cave now completely hidden from view after the destruction of her climbing tree. _The Night Fury_, Astrid thinks, and summons up her courage enough to point at the rock fall and say "Toothless?" experimentally.

The boy on the ledge snaps his head down to look at her, a single sharp movement that makes her flinch a little inside. He's so _very_ barely balanced up there. If he falls "

Astrid doesn't even want to _think_ about what the Night Fury will do to her if that happens. She is absolutely sure it will blame her.

"Tt-th-ss!" the dragon-boy cries. The joy and pure love in his tone is obvious, and that expressive face all but glows. He makes the same

expression from earlier.

Oh " it's a smile. He's smiling at her.

"Uh st-t-t-t-__tt _!" His hands are preoccupied with keeping his balance on the little ledge, but as she watches he twists his head to one side agilely and snaps at something on his left shoulder, pulling it free from his scale-coated armor. The dragon-boy shakes the thing in his teeth and she hears a faint rustle. Then he drops it.

On purpose, Astrid realizes immediately " he watches it float down with interest, making a continuous noise that alternates between a stuttering purring sort of sound and a whistling shriek. Or maybe a shrieking whistle. Some combination of the two.

It's one of the pieces of paper she provided him with.

When it hits the ground, Astrid looks between the dragon-boy on the rock and the paper almost at her feet. She reaches for it, and checks with him.

He chirps.

She decides to take that as a yes and picks it up.

One side " the one she sees first, of course " is blank.

Then she turns it over and gasps.

Astrid hasn't seen herself very often. If she's been really over-industrious in polishing her favorite shield she can see her basic outline and if her braid needs redoing.

Still, even in rough charcoal, she recognizes herself.

It's somewhat crumpled and there are bite marks in one corner from the dragon-boy's teeth, but the image is still clear. Picture-Astrid is kneeling on a rock " this rock, she figures out immediately " leaning over something " her map " with a stick in her hand " drawing. She can even make out a bit of the expression on picture-Astrid's face, which is concentrating intensely as she focuses on the picture-paper. She's got a hand twined in her braid as if pulling on it, which she only does when truly intensely annoyed and doesn't think anyone's watching " she should have grown out of that bad habit ages ago.

"Oh my gods," she says involuntarily.

"Uh st-t-t-t-__tt_," the dragon-boy above her head says smugly.

She tears her eyes away from the picture just in time to see him execute one of those impossible leaps from tiny lip of rock to a scrubby tree, barely more than a bush, growing out of the rock wall. He only stays there for a moment, just as long as it takes for him to get his feet under him, before vaulting down to a boulder, careening agilely to the beach a safe distance away from her, completely ignoring her menagerie of objects.

When he's on solid ground, he lifts his head and calls out a long and complex chain of sounds, bouncing up and down and around and across a

scale with no known connection to anything else Astrid's ever heard.

The Viking woman has a good idea what it might mean, though, at least some of it. Thus prepared, she holds her ground as the Night Fury slithers over the edge of the cave's mouth and down the remnant of the avalanche that they can climb but no human can. It keeps one sharp green eye on her all the way down.

As does the boy, she realizes, still clutching her picture. They seem to have decided to go around her for now.

She watches, still in utter disbelief, as the boy crouched on the beach by the splashing water wraps both arms around the dragon's neck and nuzzles his face into a point under its jaw. She thinks she can hear him talking to it, but can't tell. Based on what she's heard from him already, he probably is.

The dragon shuffles slightly, bringing its hindquarters under it so it can sit down, then uses that improved stability to wrap one foreleg around the dragon-boy's back and pull him into what Astrid can only describe as an honest-to-goodness hug.

The unlikely pair stays there for a few minutes; scraps of sound drift over to Astrid, but nothing clear. When the dragon-boy eventually pulls away, he flaps his left hand at the black dragon in an obviously beckoning gesture, whistling.

They wade into the seawater and stay there a while. She can't tell if they're swimming, or fishing, or just floating.

Astrid is having a very weird day, and it's not yet noon. She looks again at the charcoal picture in her hands, stunned all over again. He must have drawn it from memory â€" he certainly hadn't had any paper when she'd been sitting like that.

But why had heâ€|

She tries to think like a dragon-boy and doesn't even know how to begin. She knows how to fight dragons, not act like one. She knows how to think like a dragon only to the point of predicting where the one in front of her might strike next. Astrid has no idea what dragons do when they're not attacking her people.

So maybe she should think like a humanâ€|

Maybe she should think like a child.

Why would he give her a drawing? A picture of her drawing on paperâ€|

"Huh," she says finally, to herself more than the boy in the ocean. He and the Night Fury now seem to be doing their very best to fish by jumping at things. It seems to be working, though, because the boy has climbed to the saddle on the dragon's back and is eating something raw and possibly, she thinks, squinting, still moving.

"You're welcome, Hiccup."

* * *

><p>To be continued.

6. Chapter 6

ON WITH THE SHOW!

**Nightfall****, Part Six**

He tears the last strips of flesh off the small fish that Toothless had insisted _you fish you fish you now!_ he eat and admires the shiny colors of the scales caked on his paws. They will be gone as soon as he gets back into the water, but they are colorful now.

Hiccup is constantly aware of his surroundings â€" the tiniest signal from his beloved Toothless-self and the waves that are pulling away from the shore as the tide goes out and the changing air above them and the drip of thin fish blood that he licks away from his cheek quite absently and the cold of the water and the heat of Toothless' heart-fire and the torn piece on the flying-with that he wants to make better and the faintest whiff of fire that is not dragon-fire and the _Uh s-t-t-t-TT_ on the shore that has not moved very far and is not currently a threat and the calls of birds and the calls of small-cousins further away â€" it's all open to him. It all tells him something.

He tells Toothless-_love_ about all of it, imitating the noises he hears in the distance and complaining about the broken flying-with and crooning his joy at being with the dragon who is half-himself. He thinks aloud about the _Uh st-t-t-t-TT_ and the paper, chirring his confusion and puzzlement and curiosity.

Toothless listens patiently, contributing small sounds of amusement and love, until the monologue cuts off when Hiccup spots a fish that the bigger dragon can't see and dives at it. It gets away and he snarls momentarily in the fleeing prey's direction, replacing the one-claw where it belongs on his front leg. Such things are common. They hunt far more than they eat.

Still, the brief immersion has drawn his attention to a new element in his environment. Hiccup submerges himself again, following his dragon-self as Toothless moves from shallows to deeper water and back again as he fishes, sensing the currents around him trying to push him into _rock there_ and so many many other things, including â€"

Returning to the surface, the dragon-boy whistles and gestures _listen love-of-mine listen you water good happy curious!_ and dives. Floating amidst the rocks and the seaweed, which he notes the presence of absently, he listens to the noises far away in the water.

Singing longsong singing, he hums to himself, under the water. Through the rush of the ocean as it breathes against the shore he can hear distant cousins who never fly but sing under the water. With the last of his air he shrieks his own greeting to the ocean dragons in the deeper waters. They may be too far away to hear him, but he can

hear them and he reaches out to them instinctively, quite naturally considering himself part of their world.

Toothless decides he has been under too long, even in these shallows, and snaps his jaws gently on the scruff of the dragon-boy's neck, pulling him up to the surface by his skins and dropping his back paws to the sea floor below so he can be sure that his partner-love comes out of the water far enough to breathe.

Singing singing they happy us singing flock far go, Hiccup chirps.
Down Hiccup good promise good.

The black dragon drops him with a splash. The dragon-boy shrieks with amusement and splashes him deliberately, purring _love love you us happy good listen?_

Together they put their heads under the water and listen to the distant speaking songs of aquatic dragons, far away from the shore.

Toothless calls out to their water-cousins, sending their name "it sounds like _Tt-(click)-th-phuh-ss_" and the sound their flock makes to identify themselves to each other and rivals for territory or prey, telling the distant dragons who they are and where they come from.

The dragon-boy rubs their faces together when they come up for air. He loves the sound of the name that is both of their names and the single self that they are with the home they have wandered away from again but still belong to, even if the calling of dragons has driven all the fish away and he is still hungry. He insisted he was not because Toothless needs the food more, but he is.

Automatically, he assesses the area for anything that he can eat to quiet the noises that his stomach will make and make Toothless upset, but the beach is covered in _pfikingr_ things that he does not know and so should avoid. _Pfikingr pfikingr strange careful cautious wary worried_, Hiccup hums to Toothless as they leave the water a safe distance away from it all.

Hiccup is reckless and impulsive and daring, and afraid of nothing "except Vikings. Vikings hurt and kill his family. He will climb without hesitation over the edge of cliffs that drop away too far to judge the water below, but he will not go so near the Viking she that she might be able to hurt him, and he will not let her anywhere near his Toothless-self.

Part of his attention has been on the _Uh st-t-t-t-TT _whenever she has been in his field of vision, and even more when she is not, because that is when she could become dangerous. Still, he is surprised when she speaks to him in a way he understands.

Come here you, she gestures in exactly the way the dragon-boy had signaled to Toothless earlier.

Hiccup braces himself against warm black scales and chirrs in shock, staring at her. He crouches down beside the protective presence of his dragon-half. _Confused strange confused pfikingr threat? look she strange look confused cautious._

She says it again, insisting, and waves a paw at the unfamiliar things across the sand. But she makes no attempt to approach them, and Hiccup is not going to go anywhere near them until he is more confident that _these _things are not traps either.

The dragon-boy remembers the paper and lifts a paw at her, then waves it at the things.

After a minute â€" although Hiccup does not use this unit of time either, having only the vaguest concept of time on a smaller scale than days, nights, and the turn of the tide â€" she makes a noise that's part huff and rises to her feet.

He watches warily as she walks among the possibly threatening objects. No dragon-traps bite her feet, or snatch her up and hang her in the air thrashing and crying in distress, or fly out of the trees to strike and snarl her.

Only when she has backed away again, far enough so that he will have time to escape if she moves to attack, does he approach the _strange strange new strange cautious pfikingr cautious _things with growing curiosity, in a careful slink that keeps him low to the ground and moves him one paw at a time, watching his surroundings all the while.

Toothless tries to follow, vocalizing his concern and love. The dragon-boy sits back in an alert crouch and tells him _guard protect trap bite trap you stay love you me trap you no guard. _If this is a trap â€" there is always that risk â€" half of himself will still be free to rescue the half that is caught.

His attention is drawn to something he recognizes with interest. _Egg egg? _

Hiccup stalks the eggs alertly. He knows that eggs do not move on their own unless they are _egg hatchling egg _and the creature inside is coming out, so he makes no sudden leap to cut off his prey's escape. His attention as he moves is instead on the sky above and the shoreline around him, watching for the owners of the eggs in case they object to the dragon-boy approaching the eggs. He raids birds' nests quite often and has frequently been mobbed by the irate creatures. It's an effective hunting strategy for the two who are one, which is why he has learned to do it â€" he eats the eggs, and Toothless is quite happy to eat the birds attacking his dragon-boy.

The _Uh st-t-t-t-TT _stays where she is. She is watching him, but he is watching her, and it's an acceptable standoff.

The dragon-boy reaches out a tentative paw and wraps it around one egg. _Cold egg cold bad sad cold dead egg,_ he croons back at Toothless as he inspects it sympathetically.

Sitting up with his prize, crouched ready to leap away just in case, he licks the shell and rubs his cheek against it, trying to recognize the type of egg it is by taste and touch and smell. It's not from any creature he's ever encountered before, and that presents a very important problem.

He holds the egg out towards _Uh st-t-t-t-TT _and whistles a

question.

The _pfikingr_ she shakes her head as if there are bugs in her ears and she's trying to see them. Maybe she's annoyed because she can't talk.

The dragon-boy's nose wrinkles. _Pfikingr stupid!_ he scolds her. But it's important. He truly needs to know. Hiccup would never eat a dragon egg, ever; if he were starving to death he would die without complaint rather than eat one, but he will quite happily eat the eggs of other species. In this he is not so different from humans, who, after all, do eat lamb. No dragon would ever eat another, even in the egg. Kill, yes. Dragons kill each other as readily as humans do, and for many of the same reasons.

But any dragon that would eat another would be a monster more terrifying than any _pfikingr_.

He tips his head to one side as he thinks, thrumming anxiously. Finally he holds the egg out towards her and roars a quiet dragon roar so as to not scare her away. When she changes color but does not flee, he tries again, whistling fragments of a trilling birdsong. Then he chirps a wordless questioning sound.

Uh st-t-t-t-TT changes color again, closer to the way she was before. Hiccup is intrigued by that â€" most of his kin cannot do that except hiding-hunting-cousins, who change all their colors at once and then try to attack and kill exploring dragon-pairs who have wandered far from home.

She tries to make the bird sounds and then makes a Viking noise.

He has to be sure â€" he's very hungry and his stomach is making noises but it's _very_ important that this not be a dragon egg. The dragon-boy tries to fit his mouth around the unfamiliar shape. "Ehkkek," he says roughly. He scavenges up one of his only other words of Norse, lifting a paw towards his attentively watching Toothless-_beloved _as emphasis. "Drakkkn ekkk?"

Of her reply, he recognizes the sounds he renders as _nuh_ and _drakkkn_ and _ekkk_. And then _ekkk_ again, and more bird sounds â€" very bad, but recognizable.

_Pfikingr danger pfikingr no us flock egg family dragon worry no egg cold dead hungry hungry sad cold egg no dragon_â€"Hiccup hums thoughtfully, wondering whether he trusts her and weighing his own observations against her half-understood claims.

He decides to risk it, biting through the shell. Its contents spill out over his paws and they do not include a baby dragon, so he licks them up hungrily from his paws and the inside of the egg, spitting out bits of shell occasionally. The second egg is identical to the first so he devours that one as well.

Egg hungry egg egg good hungry egg? Hiccup wonders if there might be more. He explores the things on the sand but none of them seem particularly edible.

He's intrigued by a flat folding rough thing that when he looks at it closer and pulls very carefully comes apart into pieces of _string

look look this string want!_ he purrs happily, taking it apart and winding the result around his foreleg, humming _string good Hiccup string yes good_ until he sees the _Uh s-t-t-t-TT_ moving in the corner of his vision and drops the shredded thing and leaps away back towards Toothless, who has risen slightly from his crouched guarding position in response to his love's retreat.

The Viking she goes very still again with one paw outstretched. Hiccup whistles curiosity and puzzlement as he assesses the thing in her paw. He recognizes it as a boring _pfikingr_ food.

Even when he'd asked her where the egg had come from, he had watched her slightly at an angle rather than looking at her directly so she could not hide under his nose. He'd watched her whole body for any signs that she might be planning to ambush him " tension in her legs, movement of her front or back paws, the way her jaw is set, the colors she turns.

Now he sinks to a crouch beside Toothless and meets her eyes properly for the first time.

Most of Hiccup's language skills revolve around emotion. He is an expert reader of body language, manner, and gesture even in an unfamiliar shape.

She is scared of them. She is angry. She is curious. She is confused.

She is offering him food. She gave him paper but it was a trap and then it was not. She is scared and she is here.

Toothless thrums at him warningly and dips his head to nuzzle at his dragon-boy, half in warning and half in reassurance.

Hiccup lifts his face to the caress, chirping and crooning _love good safe good us love stay stay us_, and settles back down into the gritty sand, watching her and the food in her paw warily. He is interested, but will not get any closer to the Viking she _Uh st-t-t-t-TT_ than he has already.

When she moves towards them and sets it down, he lifts his head from where he had rested it on his paws with renewed interest, wondering. As they watch curiously, she puts other things with the food and then backs away.

That he's more comfortable with, and he rises to his paws again to edge towards the food.

He doesn't quite get there before small-cousins drop out of the sky shrieking with excitement and hunger and silliness, swarming in the direction of the _pfikingr_ food.

Hiccup was not quite sure he wanted the food before but now he is absolutely sure. He jumps at it and crouches over the prize, yelping and chirping at the newcomers that _mine mine mine food you no food mine_ until they flutter around him and it becomes _you hello hello you good_ while they tumble in midair and ambush each other as well as him.

You you you you you? the flock asks curiously.

Hiccup tells them their name, _Tt-(click)-th-phuh-ss_, and they repeat it over and over, chattering to themselves and taking it apart like a wiggling fish, knocking each other out of the air and making leaps at the disputed food, which Hiccup gulps down as fast as possible, barely bothering to identify it in his haste to keep it out of their many sneaky claws, snarling _thief little you thief food mine_.

Toothless pounces to scatter them, paws landing heavily a breath's distance from the dragon-boy, who doesn't even flinch. _Little little you little big me this me us we fierce good love mine!_

Big big big big big, the small-cousins complain, too interested in the new dragons to go very far. _You here hunt us here us home-territory us hunt no you!_

The bigger dragon growls, challenging them to try to chase them away from _any_ hunting grounds, even if the flock of much littler dragons was there first.

You kin you? some others ask Hiccup curiously, _you dragon you flock far flying no here?_

Hiccup roars their flock-sound identifier and they croon with interest at the unfamiliar sound.

Us nest home go good good us far, he assures them that he and Toothless are not here to take their hunting grounds.

Hiccup's ears are tuned to dragon-sounds, so even over the racket of almost a whole flock of small-cousins arguing with Toothless-_love_ and each other and trying very hard to argue with the dragon-boy as well he hears the chattering, challenging sound of part of the flock on the hunt.

His head comes up curiously even as a small-cousin lands on his shoulder and licks at his face. _No Hiccup food no eat Hiccup fierce big bite,_ he warns it, snapping his jaws preemptively but harmlessly, and it purrs, amused, saying _you dragon strange far dragon_. Interested by their flock-mate's interest, others cling to his scale-skins and fight the first one for access to the new taste.

Shaking off small-cousins absently as their competition gets too fierce and claws come out, the dragon-boy sees the hunt going on. Many of the little dragons have taken to the air and are diving at the _Uh st-t-t-t-TT_, who is waving her front paws rapidly in the air to fend them off, stepping back and forth as they herd her from one group to another. One catches its claws in her long head-fur and she yells and slaps at it, missing.

Hiccup laughs a dragon-laugh at the sight.

Even through the cloud of small-cousins she glares at him threateningly, voice raised in meaningless anger-sounds.

He tips his head to one side curiously.

Bad bad bad bad flock hunt, the small-cousin currently on his

shoulder says. It flutters its wings and prepares to take off and join the attack.

Suddenly she makes a diving leap not unlike a dragon's pounce to the sand, and comes up again with a big metal thing that she swings up and at the swarming flock. Small-cousins shriek in indignation and pain and she screams back. Somewhere in there Hiccup hears his name.

Cousins us like good cousins pfikingr no good like cousins, he says to Toothless, who huffs and complains _small silly thief small many silly_.

If the small-cousins kill and chew on her she won't bring them any more food or paper or string, so Hiccup roars at the flock _stop no no ours stop no you hunt US hunt ours stop_.

They argue _hunt hunt bad bad hunt kill!_ even as she swings the heavy metal round thing at more of them, still yelling.

Toothless roars _now!_ and they scatter for the cliff tops and tree branches, complaining the whole way.

The Viking she pats her paws all over herself, making recognizably angry noises.

When Hiccup grins at her, amused by the spectacle, she yells a word that he recognizes as "No!" at them.

"Nuh?" says Hiccup, curiously.

"No!"

He struggles to separate the next word, which he manages to repeat as a slightly slurred "Bad?"

She twists her front legs together again and says it again, body language saying she is angry and disapproving.

Hiccup thinks about the word, which does sound familiar. He snarls a disapproving sound, and then looks curious.

"Yes," she says, "_bad_."

He's quite happy with this development until she says, "Bad dragons."

Hiccup yelps, outraged into using his scraps of Norse. "Drakkkn bad nuh!" He doesn't know what _not bad_ is to _pfikingr_, so he says it with his entire body, twining his front legs around Toothless and hugging him, nuzzling his cheek against the black dragon's own.

"Drakkkn â€" and he hums happily, smiling a dragon-smile.

"Good."

There's a sound in there he can't do. He clicks part of it and adds the "uudt" sound that he can to the end. Understanding what she'd

been trying to say " and completely ignoring the significance of that " he spits a contradiction at her: "Pfikingr _bad!"

She glares at him, fuming. He glares at her, snarling in the back of his throat.

Hiccup doesn't like this game anymore. From where he's crouched at Toothless' side he turns one shoulder towards her, ignoring her while simultaneously staying aware of where she is as a possible threat. The affronted small-cousins are still lurking, if flocks of small dragons screaming insults from a safe distance can be said to be lurking.

Cave nest safe go us we go safe us love worried cautious you us nest? Toothless asks him, rumbling through the dragon-boy leaning against his side. They are ready to be far away from the Viking she _Uh st-t-t-t-TT_.

Yes yes yes us happy good go yes nest us good yes love, the dragon-boy chirps and croons back at him, relieved to be speaking his own language again, which he does fluently and quite naturally. His brain has been taught over years to hear and speak the way that dragons speak to each other, and most of the Viking sounds miss him entirely. His ears and brain are not prepared to hear them any more than his throat is prepared to speak them.

And he does not want to talk to a Viking " a hurter and killer of his family " who thinks that dragons are _bad_.

No amount of _string me string flying-with bad hurt bad better string string,_ he hums thoughtfully as he leaps to his proper place on Toothless' neck, will or ever can change that.

Dragon and dragon-boy race up the precarious slope together, but a cry from below stops them, however briefly, part of the way up.

Uh st-t-t-t-TT has followed them, and they growl at her in unison for the trespass.

The only thing Hiccup understands of what she says is "dragons no bad".

He huffs at her " a convulsive movement that in another dragon would be a blast of fire " and Toothless carries him away.

* * *

><p>They have made their home in caves most of their life. If they cannot be in the air, they prefer to be in the safe environment of a cave-nest.<p>

As the afternoon sunlight pours into their temporary home, Toothless itches enthusiastically at the spots where the flying-with he usually wears touches his scales. He never resents wearing it, not when it is even the smallest part of what binds his partner-love to him, but it's always a pleasant surprise and good new unfamiliar feeling to have it off. His wriggling antics across stone and sand are hindered only by the irritatingly broken wing, which will hurt and only take longer to heal if he jars it too hard and besides, Hiccup will be upset if he does.

He pauses, upside down, to croon a delighted sound at the little dragon currently tucked away in an out-of-the-way corner of the cave. Hiccup is half-buried in the tangle of torn and stressed flying-with that he is repairing with his clever paws in the good light with the sharp-thorn from one of his pouches and the string he stole from the _pfikingr_ she. Toothless would be very embarrassed if anyone else saw him like this, sprawled across the stone and with his tongue half-hanging out, wings in all directions and tail slapping across the floor and every wall within reach, which is just about all of them if he writhes just right, but this is Hiccup, who is half of him.

Albeit half of him who uses the advantage of his vulnerable posture to swarm onto his stomach and pretend to pin him there in the same way Toothless so often teasingly flattens his dragon-boy. Hiccup drops his jaw onto the bigger dragon's black scales and imitates the way Toothless laughs at him, and then turns his head to rub his cheek against the soft smooth black scales, humming _love love love_.

Toothless lets him stay there, knowing through the way he breathes and the soft noises he makes, that he is quiet and subdued rather than vocalizing every thought to the other half of himself, the way he lowers his face to hide it against the black dragon's scales and the familiar scent of him, that Hiccup is unsettled and wanting more than anything to know that he is loved and they are together.

The black dragon knows how he feels " feels it himself even more than he would when simply sharing the emotion with his other half. There is something terribly wrong in this place and he does not know what it is. It is more than the _pfikingr_ she who continues to appear to them but does not attack or run, more than the knowledge that many many many enemies who will kill them if they can or separate them which would be worse are not far away, more than the deep ache from the broken wing or the itch of the cuts that are healing. It itches at his mind when it is quiet, digging in from the corner of his awareness like sand caught in scales.

They wish together most intensely they could leave. They are wanderers " it is in Toothless' bloodright as much as it is in the nature of his companion " the sky is theirs and all the world as well, but right now they want to go home.

Wandering far from home is a sadness when they have no choice.

But they are strong and together, they are two-who-are-one and that is a great and passionate goodness and nothing can ever, ever change that.

No words could possibly say this, not even the way these two dragons speak aloud. No words are needed. Toothless shifts slightly onto his side so that Hiccup can place his head directly in the hollow underneath the bigger dragon's jaw without leaning on his throat, dragon-boy breathing in the dragon-musk of their combined scent and bringing his own heart and breathing into rhythm with that of the black dragon's as Toothless rests his head on his beloved's shoulder and back and breathes him too. He wraps one foreleg around Hiccup and holds him there, not that the little dragon is making any effort to escape.

Together together together, they say to each other without words, without sound, without movement. _You are me and I am you and we are one._ It goes beyond any language.

Hiccup pulls away before he falls asleep as he is tempted to do, scratching as he moves at an itchy spot he knows is difficult for Toothless to reach on his own before having to be asked. He returns to his corner and crouches over the work thrumming low in his chest contentedly, which makes his dragon-self happy to hear. Itches soothed in body and mind, Toothless wriggles on the floor of the cave just for the fun of it for a while, and then rolls over to a more controlled crouch, comfortably resting on the sun-warmed stone that his antics have mostly brushed clean of sand.

Sun, the dragon hums contentedly, lifting his head and closing his eyes into it, _good sun us you me us sun safe nest good safe us._

The renewed scent of his other half on his skin far outweighs everything else, and he shifts into a minor key of _joy_.

They are together and he is not afraid of the wrong itching mind thing.

The sun comes out from behind a faint wisp of cloud and becomes too bright for Toothless' eyes, so he curls around to look into the cave and watch Hiccup work with his clever paws, sharp-thorn pinched between soft-claws and biting into the leather.

In the back of his memory, someone tells him not to chew it. He doesn't remember who said it or when and the memory is gone as quickly as it had come, leaving no trace.

Hiccup is rarely silent, a quality the black dragon usually appreciates about him in that he is a match for the bigger dragon's intelligence like few others, but there are some reasons why he would be completely quiet. He is silent when he hunts, stalking prey on the ground or with Toothless in the air; when he is truly and deeply happy; when he is truly and deeply _un_happy; and, like now, when he is concentrating so hard on the work he is doing that his body and mind can do nothing else. He goes into this silent state when he draws, when he thinks of new things, and when he is making things with a succession of sharp-thorns â€" they break, get lost, or go dull so easily, and they cannot be sharpened again like dragon-claws, the pair has learned â€" and clever ties.

Toothless loves to watch him do so. It is part of what makes him unique among dragons and precious to the flock and one of the many, many reasons why Toothless would do anything for him. It is a thing that he can do like the way Toothless can see in the darkest cave and other dragons cannot.

Together they are the best of dragons.

* * *

><p>It's long since dark when the stranger lands in the mouth of their cave.<p>

The two of them had soaked up all of the warmth that the stone had held until long into the night, looking up into the clear dark sky. They navigate by the stars and each familiar one is a guideline in their night like a warm thermal, leading them somewhere. Sitting against the bigger dragon's flank and looking up into the night sky, Hiccup had purred constantly and quietly, a deep hum beneath his own frequency range and detectable to him only as a vibration through their bodies, temporarily but perfectly happy. Dragons tell no stories about the stars; they see no shapes in them, but some deep and primeval part of them recognizes _sky fires_ and feels a draw to them. They recognize that they move with the depth of the night and the coming of morning, and they know that they go away and come back with the coldest of winter and the comparative heat of summer.

Hiccup had dozed off against his dragon-self's side and Toothless had regretted having to wake him up to bring him inside in the warmth, but the days when the dragon's growth had outstripped the dragon-boy's and Toothless could carry him around like a hatchling in his mouth were more or less over. As it was, Hiccup had raised his head from his paws, blinked, hummed a muted noise half question and half plea, and shambled into the shelter of the cave, leaning heavily on Toothless' warm shoulder and curling up under his wing, where he has been accustomed to sleeping for years, without ever fully waking up.

Not so now â€" Toothless is awake and on his feet and on high alert instantly, growling a challenge at the snake-necked dragon that has made a clumsy landing on their ledge, grasping long lethal claws around edges and coiling its long limbs to fit in the space, head dipping down in a way that makes Toothless hackle and shift so that Hiccup is well-hidden behind mantled wings and a body crouched to leap to the attack or hold his ground against an impact.

They have fought as one many times â€" Toothless is comforted even as he roars by the knowledge that Hiccup knows what to do if they must fight again.

He is already braced against the bigger dragon's side, close enough to touch so that Toothless knows where he is, but not so close that he will be in the way if Toothless leaps first. His growl is lost in Toothless' roar, but the black dragon can feel it where they touch, backing him up and giving him courage and a reason to fight.

For Hiccup who is half himself Toothless will fight _anything_, and they will win.

You? whistles the fire-skin, _you? what you? dragon you? flock?_

Go away! Toothless roars. _Cave nest ours cave you go we fight!_

Fight? fight? hunt hunt kill hunt you dragon flying?

The black dragon bristles, suddenly afraid. The wrongness is here like a stink of dragon blood on the wind, like it has stuck to this intruder.

He does not wait for it to back off. Toothless goes on the attack,

firing a single blast that knocks the _wrongness_-smelling dragon off the ledge and into the air away from them.

It screams to itself as it circles, _dragon dragon hunt no hunt dragon eat SHE SHE hungry scared dragon eat hunt flying no dragon hunt kill SHE prey dragon_

There is _sickbadwrong_ itching in the air in its wake and Toothless is _terrified_. He must drive it away from them, now, now!

He knows he cannot fly but the fire-skin does not. The bigger dragon shifts slightly to one side, signaling Hiccup to move away and free him up to run and the dragon-boy obeys instantly, claws _tic-tic_ing on the hard rock as he moves. When the faint noise stops, Toothless rears up as far as he can in the cave, summons up the shrieking whine of heart-fire blasting power, and charges at the fluttering, ranting dragon.

Mad it may be, but it flees before Toothless has to admit that he can't go any further than the limits of the rock ledge. He fires the blast after it as it retreats, though, knocking it off balance rather than doing any serious damage.

It makes him feel a little bit better. He has defended himself and his dragon-boy partner-love and his territory, and the itching stink is fading from his awareness.

Toothless stares after it in the darkness, and jumps when Hiccup lays a paw on his shoulder, crooning soothing sounds carefully and gently. Only then does he realize he's trembling from nose to tailfins, unsure what has just brushed past them and afraid to know and afraid to turn his tail to it.

Hiccup pets him gently as the dragon pants, whining with inexplicable terror. Abruptly, Toothless turns away, shoving his head into Hiccup's paws to hide against his smaller chest the way the dragon-boy does against Toothless' own ribs.

Now it is Hiccup's turn to lead the bigger dragon back into the cave and soothe him back to sleep, but Toothless' dreams will be filled with monsters and the itching in the back of his mind. He wraps his wing more closely around his other half and sighs when he feels a gentle paw over his heart to take with him against the dreams.

* * *

><p>To be continued.

7. Chapter 7

ON WITH THE SHOW!

**Nightfall****, Part Seven**

"Don't ye do it," says Gobber.

Stoick puts the tankard in his hand down on the table with a _thunk_ and glares at his friend, who takes the bench across from him entirely unaffected by the look. He is immune through long experience

and what Gobber himself calls general cussedness. "Do what?" the chief asks.

"Follow the lass like ye told everyone else no' to."

It's very early in the morning and there is almost no one else in the Great Hall other than people who like to cook or are particularly good at it, getting food prepared for anyone who wants to eat with others rather than in their own home or who is not a particularly good cook. They have enough dragons trying to burn down the village without certain people â€" naming no names â€" helping. And efforts to impose cooking duty as a punishment had proven the flaw in that idea very quickly â€" some people should not be turned loose around food that other people plan to eat whether they are disgruntled or not. Most of the light in the Hall comes from torches, the occasional guttering candle, and fire pits rather than in through the open door.

Stoick wonders if he can end this annoyingly perceptive line of questioning by ordering Gobber to fix the hinges and latch on the giant Hall doors. They never close properly and are frankly unsatisfying to slam.

Not that Stoick would know anything about that. It's much more important that the doors close properly to keep the heat in during devastating winter when it is sometimes necessary to bring everyone in the village and the animals too into the Great Hall lest they find ice statues of sheep frozen where they stand.

"I'm not following Astrid," he says. "I'm sitting here."

"Ayeâ€|before the crack o' dawn."

"It's morning. I'm awake."

"Special occasion, is it?"

Stoick briefly wishes he was a child again and could throw his plate at Gobber without any consequences more dire than missing the next meal for wasting food. It had been worth it several times all those years ago.

"'Cause wha' I know is, ye came through my forge yesterday mornin' lookin' for her and stormed out again cursin' when ye found she'd left already carrying a basket's worth o' food." Gobber scans the empty hall. "If I meant t' go with her next time she left, I'd stake out the Hall too."

Abandoning the pretense â€" he is waiting for Astrid to show up â€" Stoick growls, "That's my son out there, Gobber, and a week now she's told me to stay away. I want to see him, or I'll know why."

A week now since Astrid had volunteered to try to teach the feral boy to talk, a week of knowing the son he'd lost as a baby was alive but as far away from being his son as it was possible to be, a week of not knowing what has happened to his beloved Valka â€" Stoick is running out of patience. Waiting for someone else to do something that is important to him is unfamiliar and grates on him. He longs to get involved, judge the situation for himself, and get his boy far

away from any dragons. He doesn't even want to think about what the creatures must have done to the child to drive him so mad.

He's already caught Snotlout in the act of recruiting a small army of youths and teenagers who were trying to head out to the western shore with an arsenal worthy of an inter-clan war, and the twins can't even look west without someone cutting them off and sending them somewhere else, with various rates of success.

Typically, Gobber changes tactics the instant he's won. "What's tha', then?"

The chief glares at the paper instead of his friend. It has about as much effect. "That's the monster that took my family from me."

Gobber picks it up in his good hand â€" he's wearing a hammer as the other one â€" and eyes it. "Funny-looking creature. Big fella?"

"Bigger than anything else I've seen here. Nearabouts the size of the house it burnt its way into after a baby in a cradle." He doesn't want to talk about it, and his repeated attempts to draw the beast have not improved his desire to. This last is the most successful. Stoick is not a particularly talented artist, but he's a decent draftsman and can map an unfamiliar coast from a longboat going up and down in high waves repeatedly. And the image of the strange dragon, of a kind which he had never seen before or since, is burned into his mind the same way as is his wife's face and her laugh when they'd danced and even her arguing with him, and now the wild frightened eyes of a boy gone feral and mad in firelight and a dragon's long shadow.

Part of him does not want to know what happened to his son to bring him back in such a state. (He has already decided that the feral boy is Hiccup. He has no evidence, no proof, but his heart knows. He thinks he might have known as soon as his instincts told him to try to talk to the feral boy rather than ordering anyone with a crossbow to shoot down the threat.)

Much of him is desperately hoping that Valka is still alive, even if she is in the same wild condition. Surely there is no way a baby or a child could have survived on its own in the harsh islands of the north. She must be out there somewhere.

Stoick wants to bring his wife home. He wants to reclaim his son from the monster's shadow. For twenty years he has accepted that his family was lost to him. Rather than marry again and have a child to replace those he had lost, he chose an heir from his people to be the best of future leaders, trained to it and not just born.

Now he knows his son is alive, and on this very island, and that same heir has told him not to go to the boy.

"I don't care if he can talk to me or not," Stoick rumbles. It's only partly true. "I just want to see him."

"And if ye frighten him? If he runs from ye?"

"I'm not going to hurt him."

"He doesnae know tha', whoever he may be."

They have been friends for a very long time, so Stoick looks past this statement and confides in his friend. "It's him, Gobber. I'm sure of it."

The blacksmith sighs, in a way Stoick would almost describe as sympathetically if this weren't Gobber. "And _ye_ do not know tha'."

"Yes. I do."

Gobber shakes his head sadly, placing his hand flat on the table between them. "Twenty years, Stoick. If Valka had lived, surely she would ha' come back to you, and she knew how important your son was to you. She would ha' protected the little one with her life and used all her strength to bring them both home. Let the poor ghosts rest."

Angrily, Stoick tries to deflect. "Gobber, we need that boy. He can talk to dragons. He can win us the war."

"Aye," his friend says patiently, "I'm no' disputing tha', it's good sense. But tha's got nothin' to do wi' you sitting here waitin' for the lass."

"Whatever you've got to say, say it," Stoick snaps, wishing he was holding the tankard so he could bang it down again for emphasis. But it isn't in his hand and picking it up again just to bang it down would look sillier than the Viking chieftain likes to look.

"I already did. Don't let yon wild boy hurt you because he's sommat other than you want 'im to be, and don't ye frighten th' livin' 'cause ye're too busy chasin' the dead and th' gone."

It's good advice that Stoick has no intention of following.

* * *

><p>Astrid comes in later in the morning, when the benches are half full with yawning Vikings and the sunlight streaming in through the doors " he forgot to ask Gobber to fix them again " has lit up the cavernous room brightly. She greets the people who greet her pleasantly enough, remembering names and problems and accomplishments accurately.<p>

She collects a basket that seems to have been prearranged for her or just stored in here and heads back outside.

Stoick stands in her way unavoidably. He's between her and the door so there's no way she can pretend she hasn't seen him.

She doesn't try, following him obediently when he crooks a beckoning finger at her and points her to an unoccupied table some distance away from the rest of the people in the hall.

"Tell me about him," says Stoick the instant she sits down.

Some of it she's told him before, but she must hear the intensity in

his voice because she says it all again. "He's clever. I think he assumes everything associated with me is a trap, so he won't go near anything I put down unless he sees me do it. He won't get close enough for me to touch him â€" I think he's worried about me hurting him. As long as I'm safely out of arm's reach, he's getting used to me being there."

She summarizes efficiently, a useful skill. "I don't think he eats enough, at least not stuck where he is. He's a good scavenger, though, partly because he's willing to eat a lot more things raw than I would be. He could hunt or forage better if he left the shore, but he won't go far from the dragon. He started to be a lot more comfortable with my presence once I started feeding him. But he won't take the food from me even if he's obviously hungry because he's been feeding the dragon rather than himself. He does that. He loves that Night Fury, and, chief â€" it loves him.

"He waits for me to put the food down and move away, and then watches me the whole time while he moves towards it. I think he must have stumbled into a trap or a snare at some point â€" he's too afraid of them. Sometimes he tests food before he eats it â€" tries a little bit but no more â€" possibly because it's unfamiliar. I brought four different kinds of cheese a few days ago, just to see what he'd do, and he had to check all of them. If he usually hunts and eats things raw, then he's probably gotten sick from it in the past. So he's smart enough to try to avoid that happening again."

Astrid sighs with pure frustration. "He must know he's human! The way he uses his hands â€" the harness the dragon â€" Toothless â€" was wearing? He was sewing bits of it yesterday with some thread I brought him to play with! He took apart the canvas for thread, so I wondered what he'd do with raw string," she explains, seeing the chief's eyebrow go up at this unlikely plaything. "He draws in the sand and puts chalk designs all over the rocks. When they wash away in the tide he puts new ones back. He took apart a wooden toy wagon I brought him and looked at all the pieces, then put it back together again â€" and it worked! The wheels still rolled! I couldn't believe it â€" I can name you half a dozen people just from the ones in this room who couldn't do that with written instructions and a lesson. But I won't," she adds hurriedly. They might hear her.

"The thing isâ€¦I don't think he does know. It's exactly like I'm talking at a dragon. A smart one, one that can't breathe fire and can't fly, but the way he looks at me â€" when I meet someone's eyes around here, I connect with them. We acknowledge each other as people. He looks at me but he doesn't look at my eyes, and when I do manage to catch his eyes I can't get through to whoever's in there. He sees me, but he doesn't look at me, if that makes any sense. He's so different."

Stoick rumbles disapprovingly. "I need to talk to him, Astrid. Can he talk?"

She shakes her head. One hand anxiously creeps up towards her braid, and she drops it back to the table and puts her other hand on it when she notices. "Not reallyâ€¦ Chief, no. Not yet."

He unrolls his drawing of the dragon and places it on the table before her. "I need to know," he says, emphasizing every word like hammer blows.

Astrid bites her lip. "One more day," she insists. "_Please_. Let me at least warn him that you're coming. If you show up unexpectedly he'll run, just like a wild animal."

Damn Gobber. Stoick hates it when his old friend is right, if only because he tends to gloat, and occasionally sing, which is truly horrific. "Fine. You've got today. Tomorrow I come with you, though. No excuses."

"Yes sir," Astrid agrees, getting to her feet. "I'll tell him â€" at least, I'll try."

* * *

><p>Astrid has spent enough time walking up and down this path in the past week to know that something is different about it today. It's as if either something large has blundered through tearing off tree branches by accident or something has come through tearing off tree branches on purpose. Either way, she knows that particular fir didn't look like that yesterday.<p>

She has been unable to bring herself to wander around in the woods completely unarmed. In the interest of not spooking the feral dragon-boy and the still-terrifying Night Fury, she has left her favorite axe at home in favor of a weapon she can leave in the woods before coming out into their space, a small belt knife. Well, comparatively small. Smaller than the axe, anyway.

Now she draws it and holds it cautiously, ready to stab or slash or use the blade defensively to keep an attacker away from her. She eyes the forest around her, looking for any sign of who or what else has been here.

It briefly occurs to her that she is doing the same thing the boy who is slowly learning to answer to "Hiccup" does quite often, stalking prey that might be stalking her.

There are fresh boot tracks in the earth, and Astrid swears, wondering who has snuck out this way. Bad answers occur to her and she casts aside swearing in favor of following the tracks as quickly as possible. The _last_ thing she needs is someone with a crossbow and a good aim trying to be a hero.

Or worse â€" someone with a crossbow and a _bad_ aim. She doesn't know what Hiccup would do if his dragon-companion was killed â€" having seen boy and dragon interact like two people with a single mind, inextricable, she suspects he would not recover, that he would simply lie down and die from loss and loneliness â€" but if Toothless was attacked by a Viking again and _survived_ she is absolutely certain that their ongoing war with the local dragons would suddenly become much less important than a whole new war with a raging Night Fury.

The tracks take her upwards, out of the forest and up onto the edges of the sea cliffs that the dragons' beach is part of. Dropped needles replace boot prints, and Astrid follows them faithfully, more and more worried. From these cliffs it would be easy to see the shore, if from a distance, and if she remembers correctly there is even a point up here where it is possible to see part of the mouth of the

inaccessible sea cave.

This is very bad.

Her pursuit leads her to an edge of the cliff with a good if distant view of the cove, where she discovers a pile of tree branches. Astrid is very briefly baffled until she sees the boots sticking out of one end and the battered home-made book barely visible between the needles at the other.

Oh, thank the gods. She puts the knife away.

Approaching as silently as possible, she leans down and taps the ankle attached to the boot sharply.

The pile of tree branches yelps, shakes, and yields a somewhat sap-covered Fishlegs.

"Oh â€" _Astrid_!" he says. "Umâ€" fancy meeting you here?"

"Do I even need to ask what you're doing here?" she asks rhetorically. "And do I even want to?"

He brandishes the tattered bundle of pages, somewhat haphazardly sewn together. "The _Book of Dragons_ doesn't even really _have_ an entry for the Night Fury, just an empty page!" he says excitedly, flipping through the facsimile he made so he could update it â€" trainee dragon fighters are not supposed to draw on the only original version, and adults of the tribe even less so â€" to the relevant page. Or lack of page â€" she does remember it as mostly blank, and always just suspected that the original writers had simply run out of dragons right before they ran out of pages and invented one because they didn't want to admit that they'd miscounted. After all, no one had ever _seen_ a Night Fury.

Sure enough, the original title and page contents, which Fishlegs had copied down in ink, are now accompanied by a host of scribbled notes in charcoal.

Astrid sits down on the ground away from bits of sticky sap and borrows the booklet, reading what he's added. _Highly intelligent_, it reads. _Shoots a blast of fire rather than a normal flame_, _black scales and green eyes, makes a screaming whistling sound before it shoots, no known shot limit, has been observed with human rider_. There are also some size estimates, mostly along the lines of 'smaller than this kind of dragon, larger than that kind of dragon' rather than numbers.

"There's so much we don't know about it," Fishlegs says when she hands the copy back. "Now that we know it exists, there might be more of them, and we've got to be ready!"

She thinks he might have a point, but she's not going to admit it straight off. Besides, learning about the Night Fury and its boy is her job, even though she doesn't necessarily want to come out here and study it like Fishlegs does. "How did you get out here? I thought just about everyone in the village was making sure no one wandered out this way."

"Wellâ€" everyone's kind of mostly watching the twins and Snotlout,"

Fishlegs points out, "especially after that stunt he pulled the other day."

Ah. That explains a lot.

"And you're hiding in a pile of fir branches becauseâ€|"

"Some dragons have a phenomenally good sense of smell," he answers promptly, "like the â€"

Astrid holds up a hand preemptively to cut him off before he can get going and list every dragon he knows of by relative sensitivity of smell on the numbered scale that is one of the things he's added to his personal copy of the Book of Dragons and only he uses. "I read the book too, Fishlegs."

"Oh. Right. Umâ€|what's it like?"

She must have blinked at the wrong moment because he's suddenly ready to take notes, staring at her avidly.

Astrid does not particularly want to be interrogated about dragons by Fishlegs right now. She casts around for a suitable and sufficient distraction or bribe.

And finds one. "I'll tell you what, Fishlegs. You know the dragon rider?"

He nods â€" of course he knows about the dragon rider.

Everyone on Berk knows about the dragon rider, including the little children. Two days ago she'd made the mistake of walking through the middle of town right as a flock of sheep stampeded wildly through the same area â€" yes, sheep can stampede if they're spurred on by some of the children big enough to walk and get into trouble but not big enough to be put to work, who are riding on the backs of some unfortunate sheep right in the middle of it all yelling that they are riding dragons. One of them had been waving a lit torch and trying to roar like a dragon, which had been doing a lot to encourage the stampede.

That had been a weird day.

"You know he likes to draw?"

He did not know that. His eyes go big and amazed. "Really?"

"He likes drawing the Night Fury. If you don't hang around up here and try to put an illustration of it in your book, I'll see if I can get him to draw it himself, and I'll give you the result."

Fishlegs says "OkaybyeAstrid," so fast it's practically one word and clambers to his feet. He's halfway down the slope headed back towards the forest path â€" and Astrid is mentally patting herself on the back for a successful negotiation â€" when he stops and turns around, reversing his steps so he doesn't have to shout.

"Hey, Astrid? Is that really Chief Stoick's son?"

Isn't that the question? Astrid thinks. What she says is, "I'm not

sure. I don't think even he knows, and he can't really talk so he couldn't tell us even if he did. Butâ€¦I thinkâ€¦probably."

"Wowâ€¦" says Fishlegs, awed. She expects him to be amazed by the dragon and the fact of the dragon-boy riding it, so she's not expecting his next question. "Is it weird?"

"Is what weird?" she's forced to ask. Many things are weird.

"If dragons hadn't taken himâ€¦he'd be the heir to Berk instead of you."

It wasn't before, but it's suddenly very weird. Astrid tries to imagine the feral boy as fully human and can't do it. She's wondered what he might look like if he stood up properly and cut his hair out of his face, if he didn't stare at her like he was waiting for an axe to appear in her hand and for her to run at him screaming, if he wasn't constantly petting a lethal dragon and being petted by it in return, if he smiled like a human instead of snarling like an animal, if he spoke in words instead of shrieks and croons and roars â€" but only as a way of passing the time and relieving the frustration of trying to interact with him. And no matter what, there was a constant overlay of dragon to him she couldn't remove even in her imagination.

She's never really thought of him as being a real human under the dragon's skin, never imagined the '__what if' Fishlegs tossed out there so casually. She would have grown up with him, she realizes, would have seen the human boy every day and thought nothing of it. He would have been someone, rather than just on the edge of some_thing_.

"I haven't thought about it."

As of right now, it's a blatant lie. From now on she suspects she will not be able to stop thinking about it.

She did grow up with Fishlegs, though, and he has learned over time the note in her voice that says this conversation is over, go away_.

He does, although he reminds her as he goes that he'd really, really like that drawing. She does mean to follow through on that promise even though he's given her a nasty and unexpected shock that will be bothering her all day and beyond.

* * *

><p>"Hiccup?" she calls when she arrives at the shoreline. "Hiccup, it's Astrid. Where are you?" She doesn't have much hope that he will learn to respond to this question and come to meet her on cue, considering he won't come near her on his own, but she knows he responds better to tone of voice than actual words, and he's sort of accepted the way she pronounces his name. She suspects she could say meaningless things, or recite rhymes, and he would hear only the way she was saying it, with the occasional broken bit of Norse he seems to remember or has picked up thrown in.<p>

At least he's not hiding today. Two days ago something â€" she doesn't even know if it was something she did or if it had been

something unique to whatever is going on in the dragon-boy's head and therefore completely inexplicable to sane people â€" had spooked him and he'd retreated from her steadily despite the food on offer, leading to a rather absurd dance across the beach as he backed away and she crept forward. It had ended in metaphorical tears as he'd lost patience and outright roared at her until she'd retreated back to the flat rock which seems to be her space the same way the cave is his and the dragon's. Then he'd hidden for the rest of the day. She hadn't realized he could stay out of sight on the beach even without retreating to the inaccessible sea cave, although she'd been able to guess roughly where he was by the dragon's movements. Toothless, at least, always knew where he was.

He's hunched over in the sand, playing with the chunk of blue glass she'd brought as part of her basket of offerings a week ago and has brought back recently. She's amused by the way he investigates things, which is somewhat childlike and very thorough. Personally, she wouldn't have wondered what glass tastes like, but he does, lapping at the side of it gently and then grimacing at the curious texture, which he rubs against one cheek to feel more closely.

This would have confused her earlier, but since then she's gotten a look at his bare hands, if from a distance. They're calloused and rough and scarred. The last two fingers on his right hand are slightly off, as if he'd broken them at some point, but they don't seem to bother him or make him any less dexterous. Which he is â€" she hadn't been exaggerating to Stoick earlier about him sewing, and she suspects the dragon-scale and leather clothes are all his work.

Although he's not wearing the clawed gauntlets at the moment â€" they're strapped to the rough belt around his waist where he can get to them remarkably quickly â€" she thinks it's no wonder he wears them so often. They're probably as much to protect his human hands as they are to use as dragon-claw weapons or for traction as he climbs.

Hiccup's head comes up, with draconic alertness, at her approach and her voice, although he looks away, back at the glass, as soon as he's assured she's again not armed and not approaching him. She's become part of his landscape and as long as she stays there, Astrid thinks he's not worried about her.

Not that she doesn't do something similar with regard to Toothless, who still terrifies her even if she won't admit it. Where the boy won't make eye contact, the dragon eyes her directly from his perch on a spur of rock, as if constantly assessing her as a possible threat. Its gaze freezes her blood and makes her stomach sick in ways she hasn't experienced since childhood.

Astrid knows dragons as enemies, though, and thinks to her disgust that this might be her rejected â€" but resistant â€" fear talking. If Toothless meant to hurt her, she reasons with herself, he'd have done it by now. She's been around him quite often and, unlike Hiccup, the Night Fury doesn't have to get close to her to attack. He could blast her from the stone quite easily, but hasn't. Anyway, after a few moments, the dragon turns away from her and goes back to intensely looking out to sea, peculiar black ears flattened towards his head. Involuntarily, she follows his gaze but whatever he's looking at, she can't see it.

She wonders if Toothless knows that she's trying to take Hiccup away from their wild coexistence, and suspects that he might. Astrid realizes that Stoick would snatch up the boy and kill the dragon and expect that to work.

Astrid really needs to remind her chief and mentor quite strongly why this would not be a good plan.

As she sets out the food collected from the Great Hall earlier "the people who like to cook are surprisingly happy to feed a dragon-boy as well, as long as they think of him as a hungry human child" she spends a few minutes watching Hiccup play with the blue glass, looking through it, starting in surprise, and then running primitive experiments with putting other things under the glass and looking at them through it or pointing it at things too big or distant to move, including Toothless, moving it from sunlight to shadow and watching the refracted light travel across the beach, and rotating it in his hands to watch the light change. She wonders what he's saying as he does so, although she can hear noises that sound curious and interested and amazed. The supervising dragon purrs back at him occasionally.

After a while, she tries to get his attention away from it and towards her and her message for today. Stoick has entrusted her with the responsibility of caring for this boy who he truly believes to be his lost son and she doesn't want to disappoint him.

Knowing that he will come here tomorrow anyway, regardless of whether Hiccup is ready to see him, much less talk to him, is an additional incentive. Once Stoick has decided that he's going to do something, he's going to do it no matter who tries to stand in his way either physically or by trying to argue with him "and anyone who does will regret it. She's surprised she got even a week, although it is clearly not even close to enough time.

She thinks a year might not be enough.

Maybe she should start small today. "Hiccup," she calls. She pulls a piece of paper from her basket of care-and-feeding-of-dragon-boy supplies; there's a permanent stock of it in there now and between father and (probably) son the village is going to be out of paper really soon until the next trading season. Or they could put Snotlout and his cronies, who are clearly frothing at the mouth to go attack something, in a longboat and send them out raiding any other humans that cross their path or any islands they happen to run into by accident, both of which they're completely capable of doing.

Astrid makes a mental note to mention that idea to Stoick. It would solve so many of their problems at one stroke.

"Draw Toothless?" These are both concepts he is interested in and thus words he sort of knows. Recognizes, at least.

The paper gets into his hands somewhat indirectly and he quite contentedly replaces glass with paper as the object of his attentions. Ignoring the charred stick she'd supplied, he scavenges up a different one from the edges of the shore "staying well away from Astrid the entire time" and takes it over to Toothless to burn, which the dragon does obligingly with a soft huff quite unlike

its lethal blast of battle fire. Apparently this stick is better for some reason â€" she can't tell the difference â€" because he lies down in the dragon's shadow, propping the sheet of paper on the stone, and draws for a while.

Astrid hopes that the activity will improve his mood, just like promising the drawing to Fishlegs had served as incentive to listen to her telling him to do something he didn't want to.

She fills the time by trying to imagine, as Fishlegs had suggested, a Berk with a human version who had grown up there. It's simply not in her frame of reference and she can't get anywhere with it. Every time she tries, she trips over the idea of the boy fighting dragons. Since he's currently warbling at a Night Fury from right under its nose and drawing a complex charcoal line on its â€" his â€" scales from between its eyes to the tip of its snout, which Toothless tolerates until he's done elaborating on it and then promptly rubs the ashes off onto the boy's scaled armor, it's a difficult proposition.

She's reduced to baby talk, and Astrid doesn't even particularly like babies, who tend to smell weird and scream unexpectedly. Still, she asks, "Give?" when he seems to be done with it.

This is a word they've been working on somewhat haphazardly, and she extends an open hand in case he's forgotten it since the last attempt, beckoning.

The request gets his attention and he edges towards her, stopping outside whatever distance he thinks is safe and putting the piece of paper down. While she's distracted by it, he detours around her towards the food, leaving her wondering which of them is manipulating the other.

Moving back into his field of view, Astrid tries, "Hiccup, Stoick come here."

The dragon-boy puts the piece of bread in his hand down and backs away, looking up and around and clicking anxiously. The hissing, ticking way he says the name is in there, mixed in with whines and faint growls and increasingly desperate attempts to find the enormous Viking warrior in the undergrowth or on the shore. Futile ones, of course â€" he's not there.

It is such a good thing she persuaded the chief to give her a day to work on this.

"Hiccup, it's all right," she tries to soothe him. "Stoick good," she pieces together.

He eyeballs her suspiciously in between staring around and hisses. It's clearly a contradiction.

She repeats everything she's just said several times before he calms down and goes to play with the glass again. Maybe she got the idea through, or maybe he'd just gotten bored of listening to her. That seems to happen quite often.

A shriek from above announces the end of any more language lessons for a while, and Astrid flinches as a whole wave of Terrible Terrors swarm down the cliffs and run, fly, jump, or a mixture of all three

towards the dragon-boy, who calls back to them in a way that sounds almost exactly like the noises the real dragons are making. He's a very good mimic, and she wonders if he's just copying them or if they're actually talking to each other. They seem to like him, although they're less certain about Toothless, who is so much bigger than them and seems less amused by their antics. The black dragon glares at the one buzzing around his head until others join it and there are too many moving too fast to stare at all at once, at which point the bigger dragon barks at the little ones and they scatter into the ocean.

They come up arguing and breathing little tongues of flame at each other, the targets of which promptly dive back under the water and, if she's seeing things right, try to pull the fire-breathing ones under. It's not that there are any declared sides; it's just that the ones that have their heads above water breathe fire and the ones who don't try to dunk them and the result closely resembles what happens whenever the twins happen to be set loose on a beach.

Seeing the little menaces swirl around Hiccup, perching on his shoulders and back and clamoring to be petted " and watching him pet them " is unnerving. Not quite on the level with stared-at-by-Night-Fury unnerving, but it is definitely very odd. She shudders, careful to hide that reaction from the sometimes frighteningly observant boy and glad she's not in his place right now. Being mobbed by a swarm of Terrible Terrors is really not fun. Give her one big dragon any day. They're little, but there are lots of them, and when they get really angry, which they do easily, they're too stupid and silly to back down even when they're outmatched.

Astrid had never thought she'd be grateful for Gobber's insistence that she and her cohorts learn to fight dragons armed with nothing more than cooking implements, although she is holding off on telling him that until she really needs to.

She regrets not realizing that Hiccup would get the general idea of "bad dragons" when she happened to say those words earlier in the week. She hadn't actually meant all dragons, although she not-so-privately thought so, she'd just wanted him to stop laughing at her being attacked by what felt like dozens of little monsters. She'd meant that the Terrors were behaving badly, but of course he'd been offended.

They're sort of fun to watch from a distance, though. She tests herself by edging in closer and closer, getting all the way down to the beach. The little dragons ignore her. Clearly being hit with a cauldron is really not fun for small and silly dragons either and they've learned better than to mob her.

The Terrors wear themselves out within a few minutes and take up perches on rocks and cliff sides and the occasional tree branch to rest, squawking at each other periodically as they jostle for room.

As Astrid watches, Toothless rises from his spur of rock and steps his way quite carefully between the little dragons sleeping like the dead on the rock fall, working his way to Hiccup's side. He lowers his head to the boy's and makes a sound that includes a whuff of breath that ruffles his hair and a rumbling purr.

Hiccup turns his face up to the dragon and laughs a dragon-laugh, rising partway to his feet " it ends up as a half-crouch " and crooning something amused. He pretends to stalk the bigger dragon, whistling like a Terrible Terror and making imitative small leaps as the Night Fury backs away teasingly.

Toothless flips his tail around in a gesture she's beginning to realize is something like laughter, not coincidentally smacking Hiccup over flat. He purrs and chirps as if he'd never heard or spoken a word of Norse in his life and wraps himself around tail and tailfins, wrestling with it until the dragon snatches it back and pounces on him directly, but entirely in play.

It takes Astrid's breath away to watch. Her instincts still say that the dragon's leap is going to end in human blood and screaming and the stink of dragon-fire. Having the result be whistles and impossibly liquid croons and shrieks of dragonish laughter is _unnerving_.

The dragon wins the scuffle, unsurprisingly, dropping his chin onto the boy where he lies in an eddy of kicked-up sand. He refuses to let Hiccup go immediately, croaking mockingly until the dragon-boy pets his nose and chin and scratches under his jaw, yelping back in his turn.

Staying quiet and out of the way, Astrid stares covertly as Hiccup ends up on the Night Fury's back, stroking the top of his head and the back of his neck gently and lovingly. Toothless purrs and relaxes, flopping down on the ground in an absent-minded sprawl.

They're so used to her presence by now and have accepted her as part of their landscape that his broad-finned tail ends up almost within arm's reach of Astrid where she sits unthreateningly on the damp edge-of-the-water rocky sand.

Astrid stops breathing all over again, staring at the black skin and scales so close to her. She wonders if it's warm. It must be, surely. No creature that breathes fire could ever be coldâ€|

Carefully, the Viking woman reaches out, summoning up all her considerable courage and stabbing it through the ice-cold heart of her fear of the Night Fury. Her fingers _almost_ make contact.

Hiccup leaps at her so immediately and silently that the first she knows of it, her face is hitting the ground with the dragon-boy on top of her like a predator. He doesn't even snarl, not until she's already pinned to the ground with his bared teeth and that furious growl a hand's-breadth from the side of her face not buried in sand and grit.

There's a rock digging into her ribs and sand in her hair and eyes and mouth and brackish seawater lapping at her feet from the flying tumble he's shoved her into and she struggles, suddenly frightened beyond thought, beyond sound, but he counters her every defense before they even get started. The best she can do is get onto her back rather than having her face down in the sand, where now at least she can _see_ the animal that's going to kill her. His eyes are as

green as the black dragon's and just as inhuman; he smells of seawater, she realizes irrelevantly, of fish and stone and dragon-musk and fire. He smells wild.

He looks nothing like the playful dragon-boy who had just been teasing a dragon that Vikings had nightmares about and trusting it unconditionally to never hurt him.

When she tries to throw him off, using her elbows and knees, the dragon-boy delivers a ruthless and crippling backhanded blow to her gut with those clawed gauntlets that has her trying to curl up just to breathe. He's small only compared to the oversized Vikings of Berk, but he's still bigger than her " and faster, and fiercer, and unexpectedly strong. He just doesn't look like it, since he's usually crouched on all fours or half-hunched cautiously, and almost invariably next to the dragon, which makes him look smaller just by comparison.

She's been thinking of him as a dragon-boy, but she is abruptly reminded that he is actually a physically full-grown man, as old as she is, and one who has probably grown up fighting with dragons with his bare hands, either in play or in self-defense.

The claws that wrap around her neck, pressing just hard enough to threaten to cut off her air or rip open her throat without actually doing so yet, are almost a secondary concern to the ones she can feel against the vulnerable point just below the apex of her breastbone, curving inward and up as if to dig under the protective barrier of her ribs and root through the vital tissue within. They cut through to her skin and go through, drawing blood freely, and could easily go further.

Viking woman and dragon-man freeze, one too frightened to move and unable to anyway because of the weight on her and the claws digging into her flesh and the snarl that she is utterly sure will literally go for her throat if she so much as tries, and the other furious and threatening, growling a wordless and animalistic sound that promises immediate and terrible consequences.

He couldn't have been any clearer if he'd spoken pure Norse.

Touch him, and I rip your heart out.

She believes it, unconditionally. He will do it. He will kill her without hesitation.

"I'm sorry!" she says, wondering if he understands the words. She puts as much of her intention as she can into her voice. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, Hiccup, I won't touch him, I promise." Astrid bites down on her lower lip, hard, before she can start babbling, and tries to figure out how to do something she has never before contemplated doing " surrender.

Slowly, she opens her palms and lets them fall to the sand where he can clearly see them if that overlong auburn tangle of hair doesn't block his peripheral vision and if he ever takes his eyes off her face; they are burning into her like a brand held close enough to scorch and scar at the slightest touch.

"Hiccup?" she says, quietly, trying to imitate the tone Stoick uses to calm people down. "It's okay. I'm not going to hurt _tt_ _th_ _ss_, _ikk-phuh_."

The growl deep in his throat dies away at the sound of his name and the dragon's in his own pronunciation â€" Astrid wants to gasp in relief that she'd gotten them acceptably right â€" but the claws threatening her stay where they are for a few seconds longer. Then, in a single movement, he rocks back onto his heels and makes a flying leap for a rock uncovered by the tide.

Dragon-claws bite into the slippery surface, grounding him, and he instantly takes off again in a brief series of rapid scrambles and leaps, fleeing.

She's not at all surprised to see him end up curled against the Night Fury's side, a fair distance away â€" she didn't even _notice_ Toothless move! The Terrors are long since gone. They're silly, but they're not that stupid.

Hiccup's green eyes glare at her over the top of the gauntlets folded in front of his face, and she's willing to bet he's growling behind them.

Astrid decides to call it a day before she provokes him any further and undoes all of her work so far.

It's only when she gets back to the village that she realizes she has once again run away from a dragon.

* * *

><p>To be continued.

8. Chapter 8

ON WITH THE SHOW!

**Nightfall****, Part Eight**

Toothless is worried.

All day he has been listening for something that Hiccup cannot hear no matter how far he listens and it is making the dragon-boy very unhappy. He climbs from the sand to the rock next to his dragon-love and curls up on Toothless-_heart-of-mine_'s back, breathing with him and trying to see what the bigger dragon sees in the distance of the setting sun.

Toothless can hear things that Hiccup cannot, which does not bother the dragon-boy. He can make sounds and do things with his paws that Toothless cannot. It does not matter; they are a whole.

He thrums reassuringly â€" whatever it is that has drawn his beloved's attention, they are together and should not be afraid.

To his surprise, Toothless shrugs his shoulders irately and hisses _hush listen hush guard warning listen far threat you hush_.

Scolded, he puts his head down and waits for an explanation or for his other half to be happier, refusing to leave. He fidgets after a while, sliding off to check the progress of the healing wing, which Toothless completely ignores as he does. The dragon-boy slinks around dejectedly and silently, upset not by Toothless' irritation at him but by the danger it implies. He can sense the tension in his other half like a sound in the air, but he cannot sense what Toothless is listening for.

Finally he climbs back onto the black dragon's back and dozes lightly, letting his mind wander as he thinks about the broken wing and the strange dragon from before and the visiting small-cousins who are too busy playing to know about anything big enough to bother Toothless. Part of his mind is also designing a tail to steady his gliding flight and his landings.

Very little of him is still angry at the _Uh st-t-t-t-TT_: the fight is over, he won, and she understands the rules, so the fight is _over_. For now. If she continues to not understand that she _may not_ go near either half of him he has warned her once " with the pitilessness of a wild animal whose world tries to kill him on a regular basis, Hiccup does not readily or naturally give second chances.

Schematics and shapes that he does not have words for unspool behind his eyelids in the reddening light of the westerly sun. His paws twitch to draw them, but he will not leave Toothless as long as his dragon-love is worried. If they are threatened, they are better together, and drawing can wait. The thought will stay regardless of whether or not he can articulate it right now.

He comes back to the here and now when Toothless raises his head and croons with interest, and Hiccup follows his gaze. In the fast-growing dark, they watch a small and mismatched flock of dragons, flying in low towards another part of the island.

Follow interest curious follow worry curious us hunt follow you me us go, Toothless chirrs quietly. He rises from his crouch and descends from the rock spur, lifting his nose and following their distant scent with his memories of the direction the other dragons were going.

As silently as possible, they leave the shore. This is a relatively safe space and one they have learned the hiding places and drawbacks and shortcuts and hidden routes and good scavenging places of quite thoroughly over the many days, but they have no intention of staying there on a regular basis.

They just have no intention of letting the _pfikingr _see them anywhere else. _Pfikingr _get angry when dragons trespass on their territory, and the _Uh st-t-t-t-TT_ comes here as if this were her territory. It is not an island for dragons. Knowing this does not mean that they will not go on the rest of the island. It just means that they will not get _caught_.

Hiccup and Toothless are constitutionally unable to stay in one place for very long. Wandering gets them into trouble on a regular basis, never more so than now, and they have been scolded for it in the past, but they persist. Grounded as they are, they explore the close

areas of the island as a form of fidgeting not unlike Hiccup's idle movements earlier.

The two who are one are quieter and faster in the dark when they move together, so Hiccup stays on the black dragon's back as they clamber over a treacherous tumble of rock, in quite the other direction from the way the _Uh st-t-t-t-TT _comes, which challenges Toothless' climbing ability. They resent not having their wings. But they make it safely out of the rocks and onto places where it is easier to walk.

Blending into the darkness perfectly, they follow the other dragons.

Wrongness here wrongness bad worry stink smell? bad worry wrongness scared, Toothless complains quietly. He tracks the dragons " his sense of smell is better " while Hiccup sits up alertly on his back, watching and listening for Vikings. When they pass under some low trees, they go very quiet. They can hear the sound of hunting dragons up ahead and over their heads, and the screaming of chased prey in the distance.

_Stalk us stalk us watch listen go dragons hunt, _Hiccup hums.

His dragon-half huffs _hush_ at him.

Quiet Hiccup quiet hush yes yes good, he responds meekly, hunching down and making no further sounds obediently. Although normally quite talkative, he can be almost completely silent when he needs to be, hiding even the sound of his breathing. Something sensitive enough to hear his heartbeat and pick it out from the rest of the background noise might know he was there, but he has been a hunter and a predator most of his life and he has been forced by necessity to be very good at it.

Some more hunting brings them to a clearing with two blue-spikes cousins and a two-heads cousin/s, which have brought down part of a herd of what Vikings would call wild boar and Hiccup does not have a name for but recognizes by the smell of the blood as _red meat_. They are chattering uneasily to each other " _hunt kill hunt food good food food good go relief hunt kill SHE SHE no kill eat food kill relief _" and not eating the kill, hunching over it and rocking anxiously on their paws.

Toothless and Hiccup crouch at the edge of the clearing, think about what to do next, and wait for the dragons to notice them. They are well-hidden in the darkness " if they were hungry, they could jump quickly at the kill and steal it, but there are many of the other dragons and they cannot fly away with it. In the air they are faster than any dragons, but on the ground they are slower, and eating will not lead them to the source of the _wrongness _or show them how to get away. A full-body shudder runs through the black dragon as his instincts tell him to pounce and he drops into the right posture anticipatorily, tail trembling with the effort to hold it still and not make a big noise in the close forest. Feeling the movement run through his legs and body, Hiccup silently and without being told reaches for the leather straps that bind him to the flying-with when they fly acrobatically, which they do often and is a perfect joy for the two who are one. He fits the rough clasps " stolen and improvised from scavenged metal one wonderful night when his kin had

ambushed a ship full of _pfikingr _things he had never seen before
â€" to his scale-skins and holds on tight, as ready to leap as is his
Toothless-_beloved_.

When the cousins notice their presence it is as if the pair had
ambushed them and tried to steal their kill. _Thief thief thief
dragon you dragon thief hunt this ours thief bad us kill us hunt SHE
us safe SHE kill food hunt good thief you bad thief goâ€" _they
screech, wings flailing and teeth snarling to drive the intruders
away, clear notes of panic in their calls.

Black dragon and dragon-boy both growl in unison, sounding like a
single being. _Us thief no thief!_ Hiccup objects, despite the fact
that he'd been considering it and that they've been known to steal
food from other nest-mates in the past. The strangers don't know
that, and the fact that Hiccup has been stealing things from Vikings
for his entire life doesn't even occur to him. That's not _stealing;
_Vikings aren't kin or even people, not the way dragons are to
him.

Toothless is more direct. _Bad here bad here wrongness-stink why?_ he
asks.

The many strange dragons scream and flee, taking off in a flutter of
wings and tails and a burst of _stink-fire-smoke _from the two-heads
cousin/s. Hiccup ducks, wrapping his scaled front legs protectively
over his head, but it/they fly away too quickly to light it,
screaming fear â€" _bad scared fear SHE SHE scared bad scared kill
hunt eat food food quick go fly food SHE no eat no eat_ â€" as they
go.

Even as his companion protects himself, Toothless leaps forward,
tackling the slower blue-spikes cousin and keeping it from taking
off. The dragons wrestle furiously, the ferocious black dragon trying
to keep the bigger one on the ground and the blue-spikes cousin
trying to flee, screaming anxiously.

Hiccup slashes at any pieces of his foe that he can reach with his
claws, snarling and lashing out at slicing wingtips and its large
muzzle, perfectly balanced on Toothless' back as the black dragon
thrashes and even when he rolls. Habit and practice means that the
bigger dragon keeps his shoulders off the ground when he does this,
which protects the dragon-boy on his back as much as it keeps his
deployed fangs close to his enemy.

They win the fight, pinning it down and growling threateningly as its
companions scream anxiously from above and then retreat, carrying
their kills.

No kill eat no kill eat no kill eat no kill eat! the trapped dragon
screams meaninglessly.

Eat? Hiccup whistles, puzzled. _No thief us no thief food no._

It keeps screaming, writhing and frightened.

_No eat! _Toothless snarls finally, hackling as the _wrongness-_stink
floods his nose and digs into his mind.

The other dragon wails, begging. _Up up up go up me food food SHE

hungry hungry food no kill no me eat go quick SHE SHE food hungry no me eat!_

Toothless recoils from the blast of panic and fear and _wrongness_ and the blue-spikes cousin takes advantage of his movement to tear itself free even through his claws, which score long and bloody gashes down its side. Its initial launch into the air, screaming in pain and fear, turns into an uncertainly hovering convulsion of panic and distress. To their surprise, it dives back towards the clearing, snatching up its kill from almost under its attacker's nose, fluttering away again and fleeing into the sky, squawking meaninglessly.

They are no longer trembling with the desire to pounce. Even though they were the winners of the fight with no more wounds than a few scratches, it is fear and confusion that now rumble through the black dragon and his dragon-boy. Either they know less than they did before, or they want to know it less.

Hiccup whimpers and crouches down on his dragon-half's back, pressing their skins close and burying his face in the nape of Toothless' neck. _Bad bad bad confusion fear bad hiding scared_, he croons.

Toothless growls protectively, not liking what he'd heard any more than his Hiccup-self does. They need to get off this island, into the air, and back home.

For the moment, they retreat back to their cave, which they have made safe and theirs and can defend and hide away from the wrongness and madness everywhere outside it, returning to the shoreline as if they had never left.

* * *

><p>Hiccup had understood what Uh st-t-t-t-TT had been trying to tell him before; he just hadn't liked it. He has been sulking behind a rock all morning, peeking over it every so often to see if she's there yet so he can ignore her properly.

As he's come to expect, he hears her calling out for him from below. He has no intention of showing himself and decides to stay exactly where he is. Last night's excursion had unnerved him as badly as it did Toothless and they are still trying to figure out what is wrong with this place. While they are imaginative, creative, and clever, they cannot remember anything in their wandering experience that could explain it all, and although they are brave and perpetually curious they are frightened.

They had both had nightmares last night.

He checks the beach again. She is standing out in the open, not hiding, and alone. No _St-t-t-t-t-t-kk_.

The dragon-boy's stomach rumbles. He has come to associate her with the presence of food, and his body is demanding that he do something about it. Hiccup sulks about that too. He does not need her to feed him the way he makes sure Toothless has enough to eat to heal, and he will go fishing later.

Toothless is not far away " Toothless is never far away " and the black dragon lifts his head and sniffs the air. _Stalking big threat stalking careful warning angry_, he growls.

From this Hiccup knows that even though he did not see the big _pfikingr_ in his brief glance, he is not far away.

On the beach, the _pfikingr_ she is still calling for him. It is very annoying.

He leaps to the top of the rock, sets his claws into the lichen on the stone, and snarls _go away_ at her.

She changes color a bit, but waves _come here you_ at him anyway.

Hiccup crouches down on his hiding-behind rock, hunches his shoulders, and glares, wishing he could get his wings to ruffle up behind him the way Toothless and his nest-mates can, making them look so much bigger and more threatening.

She goes a little paler. That's entertaining, so he leaps down from the rock and stalks towards her, vanishing behind other obstacles on his way down to the beach as if hunting something he intends to capture, kill, and eat, although not necessarily in that order.

"Hiccup!" she says, reaching a paw out towards him.

The dragon-boy growls and vanishes again. From above, he can hear Toothless, who is watching, laughing a subdued and quiet dragon-laugh. It is a good game.

Uh st-t-t-t-TT says more things, very quickly, that he doesn't understand. She sounds frightened, and angry. But she has no claws and she carries no sharp thing, and he is only playing, really, so he does not feel any more threatened by her presence than he normally does. It never quite occurs to him that she doesn't know that, and it is good that Toothless is amused and not cowering down listening to things that Hiccup cannot hear, so he continues the game.

Now she is shouting, much angrier. He does not understand the words, but he can hear the tone in her voice. He peeks out from behind his current rock. She is facing entirely the wrong way, so he perches on top of it and waits.

There is a big _pfikingr_ voice, and dragon-boy flinches as dragon growls. _St-t-t-t-t-kk_ has come out onto the beach where Hiccup can see him, and the dragon-boy is not entirely sure whether this is better than not being able to see him or worse. For now, he hunches his shoulders again and turns his head away, watching carefully out of the corner of his eye.

The _pfikingr_ make noises at each other, very few of which he recognizes. _St-t-t-t-t-kk_ tries to say his name, and Hiccup ignores him, considering retreat.

But the big Viking sits down on the _pfikingr_ she's rock when _Uh st-t-t-t-TT_ gestures him to, and then she talks at Hiccup for a bit, making reassuring sounds.

He is not substantially reassured.

She makes the noises that mean _come here_ and beckons again.

Hiccup is not going to do that.

Eventually she sighs in clear resignation, giving up, and goes to sit down on her rock with the man. On the way there, she puts a piece of paper down some distance away from the rock, leaving it there. After a few moments, she and the _St-t-t-t-t-kk_ begin to talk to each other quietly, ignoring the dragon-boy.

Curious curious paper she paper want curious careful, Hiccup hums. He watches them for a while until he thinks they are not going to get up and jump at him, and prowls a circuitous route down to where she has left the page.

A few steps from it, he sees the _St-t-t-t-t-kk_ get to his feet. The dragon-boy recoils, considers running, changes his mind instantly, and readies his claws, deciding to stay and fight instead. Behind him, he hears Toothless leap to the rough sand to defend and protect him as he goes on the attack.

"No!" _Uh st-t-t-t-TT_ cries " but not at Hiccup. Instead, she says it to _St-t-t-t-t-kk_ and says it again with another sound.

It must be a good sound, because the big Viking sits down again.

Hiccup is impressed, and tries to imitate the sound. He comes out with "chfff?"

"Chief," she repeats. He whistles a question. He doesn't know the word, and if he asks maybe she will explain it to him.

She thinks for a moment, and then shows what she means by stepping backwards and crouching submissively to the big Viking.

Hiccup sits up straight and whistles incredulously " the body language is unmistakable. _Alpha?_

That changes a lot. Dragons are hierarchical, after a fashion, and Hiccup has grown up all his life under the rule of a powerful Alpha dragon, who commands and protects the flock, and the flock protects him just like the _pfikingr_ she has just done for her Alpha, moving between the big Viking and the threatening dragon-boy.

He does not know that it is his early and constant exposure to the king's influence that has tuned a nearly perfectly adaptable infant brain to a point which enables him to hear the king's true voice, albeit less clearly than the rest of his flock. But the dragon-boy can hear the Alpha's calls and he is obedient to his commands. The concept is a powerful one to him.

St-t-t-t-t-kk is not _his_ Alpha, and he owes him no submission, but they are on _an_ Alpha's territory and Hiccup takes it for granted that an Alpha, a dominant leader, a king, will be able to command his obedience to some degree. This is a confusing and bad-feeling place but the idea of an Alpha is at least one he

understands.

Toothless rumbles anxiously, not far behind him. The dragon-boy turns away to look at him, crooning questions and worries.

But no orders are given, no punishment exacted, and dragon and dragon-boy gradually relax, although Toothless croaks that _loud many loud calling Alpha here many confused worried_.

By the time they do, both Vikings are talking quietly to each other and ignoring them again, so Toothless rests in the rocky sand near his companion and Hiccup remembers the paper that had brought him down here to begin with.

He looks at the paper that is a drawing, and forgets his anxiety in a rush of delight and recognition. "Cloudjumper!" he says joyfully, or tries to. Too many of the sounds have been lost to him and it comes out as something closer to _(click)-shhh-prrr_.

Hiccup wiggles happily all over. _Cloudjumper happy happy good safe Cloudjumper here Cloudjumper family happy Cloudjumper!_ he chirrs, examining the picture. _Cloudjumper here!_

Toothless shares his joy at the possibility of the presence of another member of their flock and family until something occurs to the black dragon and he drops his head and whimpers what in a human would be _uh oh_. Hiccup thinks of the same thing almost at the same time and presses his stomach to the sand in a submissive crouch, craning his head up and scanning the sky for the dragon that would be, if he had any idea of the concept, like a father to him.

Us fly go bad falling bad, Hiccup dragon-whispers, expecting Cloudjumper to arrive any moment now and rebuke them for being silly enough to wander away so far and get hurt this time. They are always wandering off, and they always get scolded by the protective dragon when they return.

Cloudjumper does not materialize.

The dragon-boy ticks his head to one side curiously. _Cloudjumper here no here no here why draw?_

He knows _Uh st-t-t-t-TT_ does not understand him because Vikings cannot talk properly, so he looks at her and cuts that down to "(click)-shhh-prrr herrr?" He puts a paw on the ground in emphasis.

She shakes her head in what he has come to recognize as a no.

Hiccup croons his disappointment â€" the scolding would be worth it to have another and much-loved member of his flock here, and maybe they could figure out the _badstrangewrong_, or the much larger dragon could carry both halves of them away, although Toothless hates when Cloudjumper does that â€" and drops his head to look at the paper. It's a picture of Cloudjumper, but it could be a _better_ picture of Cloudjumper.

A number of improvised charred-stick pencils have ended up scattered around the shoreline as Hiccup puts them down and forgets about them. They're sticks â€" there are always more, so he does not bother to

keep them. Now he grabs the nearest one and takes stick, paper, and himself to curl up between Toothless' front paws and work. He props the paper on one of Toothless' paws unquestioningly â€" the bigger dragon sighs into his fur but lets him do it, and then raises his head to keep watch on the Vikings still here â€" and begins to rub out lines and replace them, quite contentedly, talking to himself and Toothless as he does so.

He can hear the _pfikingr_ talking, because they are there and a threat and part of his attention is always on them, but he is not listening, even though he thinks they might be talking to him and although they sound quite upset. Things that upset Vikings are not necessarily things that upset dragons, and if they had become more of a threat than usual Toothless would know and tell him. So Hiccup draws, erases, draws, and elaborates, vocalizing his thoughts and emotions to his dragon-love, until his ears pick up a vaguely familiar word-sound and the thought reaches and escapes his mouth involuntarily and unconsciously as "Mama."

There's sudden silence from the rock.

Hiccup scowls and shakes his head as if there were flies in his ears. It was not a thought that he knew he was having, and it is not a sound he knows â€" it's not! â€" and it's not a thought he wants to have, so he tries to forget it again.

It gets abruptly harder to do so as the _St-t-t-t-t-kk_ says something, excitedly. Hiccup recognizes the noise 'yes', his name in the wrong way _pfikingr_ say it, a questioning sound, and that sound 'mother'.

He gets the general idea of the question and twists his head away, focusing intensely on his drawing, which acquires deeper levels of shading and background details as he tries to drown out the voice.

Toothless senses his agitation and growls daringly at the Viking Alpha, who holds his ground. But habit keeps the black dragon where he is, because he has learned that it upsets his Hiccup-self when he moves while Hiccup is drawing on him.

"Hiccup," _St-t-t-t-t-kk_ repeats, more quietly, and adds the same questioning sound and 'mama'.

The dragon-boy snarls, hunching his shoulders up around his ears, and ignores him determinedly.

Still, out of the corner of his eye, because he cannot bring himself to completely take his eyes off a possible threat, he sees _St-t-t-t-t-kk_ point out to sea and say "Mama" and another sound.

Hiccup desperately tries to avoid the question. He gives up on fixing the now extremely detailed portrait of Cloudjumper and flips the paper over to the other side, starting a new picture of the dragon to keep the voices out.

(Completely unintentionally, he has locked everyone in place. He won't move, because he's concentrating on ignoring the Viking Alpha. Toothless won't move, because Hiccup won't move. And Stoick won't

move, because he's just been given the first opportunity in twenty years to find out what has happened to his beloved wife. Astrid, desperate to keep this from all blowing up in their faces, probably quite literally considering what Toothless is capable of, is barely breathing. If she pushes anywhere, she is sure the whole tableau will explode.)

"Hiccup," the _St-t-t-t-t-kk_ persists, and says more questioning things involving the sound 'mother'. Then he says another noise Hiccup can't pronounce and is determined not to recognize: 'Valka'.

"A_ka_," the dragon-boy repeats involuntarily, head jerking away from the insistent Viking. Harassed and anxious for reasons he can't remember or articulate even if he could, he hides behind his long shaggy fur and draws frantically, background detail emerging around the image of Cloudjumper. Rocks and shadows, water and ice, suggestions of other dragons and an upright figure with the faint impression of a long fall of fur down its back, one paw raised towards Cloudjumper. He shades past them all without consciously noticing.

He's _not listening_, he can't hear the questions, they're not happening. Above him, Toothless lowers his muzzle, deploys his fangs, and snarls at the intrusive _St-t-t-t-t-kk_, who goes so far as to brandish a fist at the black dragon and say something threatening. Hiccup doesn't hear it, doesn't notice the incipient war about to break out over his head.

The same noises, over and over again, beating at him:
"Hiccupâ€|Valka? ...mamaâ€|mother?"

The dragon-boy wants to run, wants to be gone, wants to be anywhere but here, but he can't drown out the questions with his focus on the drawing no matter how hard he tries and long-established habit tells him that a dominant Alpha is demanding something of him and he is not obeying. That habit of submission is keeping him in place and stopping him from attacking, but he's trying very hard to ignore it. He doesn't know what the _St-t-t-t-t-kk_ is asking and he doesn't want to know.

"â€|Valka? mamaâ€|?" The Viking chief's voice is getting angrier and angrier and it pushes the dragon-boy into an answer he didn't mean to give.

"Mama kkko," Hiccup says absently, then shakes his head with annoyance and frustration again and pulls away, pressing closer against Toothless, who growls _go away go now angry threaten kill flame hurt go!_ at the man threatening his love.

But he just won't let up, figuring out the meaning even through the broken pronunciation, and he won't stop asking questions that Hiccup refuses to even think about.

The dragon-boy snarls and waves a paw in his general direction without looking, pushing him away, avoiding eye contact, unable to escape. He mutters "mama nuh mama Aka nuh" in a growing whine of broken Norse. He needs the Viking chief to go away and stop asking him this. "Mama kkko no herrr Aka kkkoâ€|" The bit of paper is covered in charcoal by now, blacking out the picture completely, but

he doesn't let up. If he can focus on _this_ the rest will go away.

A marginally less threatening voice intrudes anyway. "Hiccup," _Uh st-t-t-t-TT_ calls softly. He peeks at her from under his fur.

She points to herself and says, "Aka," then walks away, waving a paw in the air at him the way she does when she leaves. When she comes back, she says a word that Hiccup has come to recognize as "Yes?"

Hiccup plays pretend quite often. He can play with feathers and pretend to be a bird, or pounce at Toothless and pretend to be a small-cousin. He understands what she's just done a little better than the _St-t-t-t-t-t-kk_ talking at him, although that's not what â€

He flinches away again, whining deep in his throat involuntarily, unable to get any closer to the dragon who is half himself and too overwhelmed and frightened to flee properly. Hiccup needs them to not be here and he needs to be somewhere else and he can't understand why they _won't stop_.

He shakes his head convulsively, and, in hopes of getting them to _stop_, raises a paw to gesture at the _pfikingr_ she, then down to the ground, the shaking transferring itself to his whole body. "Mama kkko," he mutters again. "Drakkkn â€" Hiccup raises his head briefly and imitates the noise of his nest-mates blowing fire, then waves a paw in the air erratically, because they had blown fire at her when she was cold and still and silent, after â€

He remembers and he doesn't want to. He remembers the fire and the loneliness and the sad in the nest and the confused and the fear. The besieged dragon-boy abandons his now thoroughly shredded piece of paper and wraps his front legs over his head, huddled between Toothless' front paws and whimpering.

But even if he doesn't understand all the words, he can still hear _St-t-t-t-t-t-kk_ say, "â€|motherâ€|Valkaâ€|dead?"

He remembers that word anew, and yowls in pain.

That is Toothless' limit and beyond, and the black dragon leaps to his feet, roaring in rage and breathing in a whistling breath all ready to blast _St-t-t-t-t-t-kk_ from the sand. He stands over his trembling, hurting Hiccup-self and _screams_ furiously, fully intending to remove the threat permanently.

The two _pfikingr_ retreat rapidly, unwilling to take on the black dragon.

Trying to forget all over again, curled in the smallest ball he can manage in the sand beneath his Toothless-_love_, another memory returns to Hiccup, and he freezes, going silent.

Despite his roars, Toothless is so tuned to his other half that he hears even this lack of sound, and goes quiet, with an all but inaudible whimper as he steps back only enough to drop his nose to his Hiccup-_beloved-self_ and croon his sympathy and his absolute and eternal love.

Hiccup opens his eyes and looks up at Toothless. He reaches up and places one paw on his other half's nose, sits up, closes his eyes, and touches his own nose to the other dragon's, breathing with him, a single self.

Then he comes half to his back paws in an aggressive crouch, snarling even as he draws his claws and moves to the attack through the pain tearing him apart, fear or no, Alpha or no.

"Pfikingr do!" Hiccup roars, and leaps.

The _St-t-t-t-t-kk_'s throat is hidden so he goes for the man's eyes instead, faster and fiercer than he'd attacked the _pfikingr_ she before because she tried to touch Toothless-_heart-of-mine_, _because he'd known he wasn't going to hurt her unless she forced him to but now â€œ"

Now, he has been pushed too far, and consequently he does not think the movement through. His lunge is not as stable or as steady as he would like, and _St-t-t-t-t-kk_ manages to stop his claws from reaching the big Viking's face by grabbing the dragon-boy's wrists before he can make contact.

Toothless screams in hate and frustration, unable to fire because his dragon-boy beloved-self is too close: he will hurt them both.

Hiccup doesn't notice, doesn't care. He is too angry to think, and he snarls in the face of the enormous Viking even as he struggles to free his paws. He does not register the horror in _St-t-t-t-t-kk_'s eyes, nor that the _pfikingr_ does not try to hurt him in return, but shoves him to the ground and away.

The feral boy comes back up sounding exactly like his dragon-companion, who pounces over him to protect him as the Vikings retreat as quickly as possible, vanishing into the woods before the situation can get any worse.

Hiccup wails in newly-remembered, long-buried pain, an animalistic and agonized sound. He is trembling with fear and hate and confusion and pure adrenaline, yowling in rage because he does not remember how to cry. It's a terrible sound.

He stops only when he runs out of breath, gasping. But there is no one left to scream at, so he collapses to the ground and shakes until Toothless lies down beside him, curling around him and burying the dragon-boy in black scales and warm wings and their combined dragon-scent. He had forgotten; he had _genuinely_ forgotten because it had hurt so badly and it had been so long ago.

He barely remembers his mother; she is a blurred shade and an emotional memory rather than a visual one. He had been too young, and the memories had been lost as he adapted to survive with his flock. He had not recognized the shadow he had briefly drawn into the picture with Cloudjumper as her any more than he had been able to put a shape or a face to her. He remembers that he had loved her. He remembers only now that she had died. He remembers only now _how_ she had died, and that his nest-mates had burned her body and she had flown away on the wind.

Although he cannot articulate this, it had been the last time he had been in a human presence in any meaningful way for fifteen years.

He had been five years old, and almost more dragon than human already.

The dragon-boy does not cry. Dragons do not, and he has lost the reflex. But he hurts, and he screams into Toothless' side and tries to forget all over again as his dragon-half wraps around him protectively and hides him from the world.

They are together in this sickbadwro nghurting place but they are besieged from without and within.

* * *

><p>To be continued.

_ There will now be a brief interlude for Valka's story._

9. Chapter 9

ON WITH THE SHOW!

**Nightfall****, Part Nine**

For Valka, it begins in terror.

She's no sooner gotten her arms around the baby than enormous claws wrap around her body in the exact same way and she feels her feet leave the ground.

Of course she screams, panicking and afraid. She had only wanted to get to the baby, she thought the dragon had understood, that when she had signaled to Stoick that he didn't have to attack she had been saving all their lives, but instead she has killed herself and the precarious, precious little life she's doomed with her.

Terror is her husband's roar of rage and loss from far below, the howl of the hungry fire, the screams of dragons, the crying of the baby.

Three of those sounds recede into the distance as the enormous dragon clutching her flies upwards into the cold darkness, carrying her away.

And then the baby stops crying.

Valka forgets her fear for her own life instantly. It's too dark to see and Hiccup's sudden silence brings back too many memories of nights when she'd sit up until daylight, because she thought if she took her eyes off the tiny, fragile baby he'd stop breathing when she wasn't looking.

But when she presses her face to his she feels delicate eyelashes blink against her skin and a noise that sounds like a wondering sigh.

They are in the air for what must be hours, because eventually the

sky begins to lighten all around them. Hiccup does not so much as sob the entire time and Valka holds the last part of her life she has left to hold onto and prays.

As the sun comes up, the enormous dragon sets down on an island â€" barely even that, hardly more than one of the sea stacks that make sailing in the north in a storm such an adventure. It releases her as gently as possible considering how stiff her entire body is, and she stumbles away from the dragon's claws, uncurling her limbs for the first time in hours. In her arms, Hiccup wakes up and yawns. She envies him his acceptance of the impossible way his world has just changed, but she supposes everything is impossible to a baby and wonderful as long as it is not actively painful.

Puzzled, she stares at the peculiar dragon, who stares back at her. Again, she finds herself caught by its eyes. Most dragons she's encountered look through her or look at her as a threat. This one is looking at _her_.

"Hello," she says tentatively.

It â€" he? â€" thrums deep in his chest.

Well, he hasn't eaten her, or the now-squirming baby, so Valka takes her chances. "I'm going to look after the little one now, all right?"

The dragon looks away from her, which she decides to take as permission to do whatever she wants short of hurting him.

It's only sometime later, when she lies down and puts her back to the dragon, baby Hiccup protected from sun and dragon alike by her body, that her abductor looms over her again.

He rears up, spreading his wings indicatively and for balance as he stretches out a back paw, claws splayed out.

"Oh no," Valka tries not to complain. "More flying?"

She doesn't have very much choice, so she steps into his grip and they take off again.

The next time they come down they do so in a terrifying dive through the most peculiarly shaped glacier she's ever seen. It looks like an explosion made of ice wrapped around an island, which, she discovers as she pries her eyes open and loosens her crushing grip ever so slightly on the baby â€" who is _laughing_ â€" is essentially the case.

And they are surrounded by dragons, hundreds of them, ones she's never seen before and can't even begin to put names to.

They are very far from home.

Valka decides to give up being terrified. She is not yet dead, and 'her' dragon has had plenty of opportunity to kill her. The baby is apparently perfectly happy, undisturbed by dragon-sounds from all around and a constant unfamiliar but not unpleasant background smell of what she decides must be a dragon nest as much as their sudden plunge or prolonged flight. Little Hiccup is doing better than she

is, she notes ironically to herself.

'Her' dragon releases her to walk on her own two feet, but almost instantly drops his nose to her back to nudge her in front of him.

"Go that way?" she asks, wondering if she's just making noises at him.

He pushes her again, so she goes before he pushes her over on her trembling and stiff legs. In this way they travel through a handful of darkened tunnels, dragon pushing her one way or another in the half-dark. There is just enough light from somewhere up ahead for her to see by.

When she emerges into the light she does so with awe.

There's life in this impossible island, green plants and all sorts of colors decorating them, and even more and stranger dragons overhead and scattered around on the ground. They stare at her curiously even as she stares back.

Stumbling forward on reflex now, she sees for the first time the king of them all.

Whether she drops to her knees that first time from exhaustion or wonder she will never quite be sure. Had she thought that 'her' dragon was enormous? This is the biggest creature she has ever seen, and it looks at her with what she suddenly realizes is intelligence.

It sees her. He sees all of her.

He sees the woman who believes there are other and better options than killing, the woman who wants to know things, the woman who wants to change the world because it could be other and better than the way it is if people would try.

Before this great king of dragons she is the woman who can stand in front of an enraged warrior and say "No," and hold her ground, the woman who had taken on the burden of a leader and the love of one at the same time despite all the things she didn't like about the people who would look to her, the woman who loves a man who argues with her and dances with her and who could hold his son in the palm of his hand when he was born but who loved him anyway and insisted that he would survive despite what anyone else said, the woman who would run unarmed under the nose of a dragon to save a child.

The king of dragons sees Valka, in all her fear and confusion and courage and love, and she knows he sees her: she holds her baby and weeps under the eyes of the king.

A few days later, after she has slept and washed and eaten and drunk and begun to be less overawed by this incredible refuge of dragons that has survived untouched by humans under the rule of the great king, it occurs to her to wonder what Hiccup had felt under the gaze of the king of dragons, and what the king had seen in a baby who reached out to dragons and laughed when he flew.

* * *

><p>The dragons are curious about her to the point of intrusiveness. When she laughs with the baby, they imitate her, going hough hough hough at each other and her. They have been bringing her things â€" sometimes animals and plants, sometimes metal, sometimes more delicate things clearly stolen from humans, like fabric â€" to see what she'll eat, what she'll reject, and what she'll do with what she can use, with an interesting range of results.

Valka is infinitely grateful to the one that found her a beehive full of honey â€" even if he hadn't quite managed to get all the bees out. She'd only been stung twice, though, and the nearby dragons, staring at her antics with interest, had worked out that she did like the beehive but didn't like the bees, and taken over swatting or flaming them down, after a few minutes. Bees, apparently, do not bother dragons. Too many scales, she guesses. (She'd had to snatch up Hiccup and hide behind a protective and solicitous Cloudjumper, who is not so much 'her' dragon as she is 'his' human, while they did that, and the abandoned hive had barely escaped being stepped on.)

But the honey was a gift from the gods. She's been using it up at a fair-winds rate soothing a mildly colicky baby, and has found that the easiest way to do so is simply to smear Hiccup's little hands in honey and let him lick it off, or, as he tends to do, try to cram his entire hand into his mouth to get it off. He's utterly unfazed by being surrounded by dragons many times his size, babbling quietly and unintelligibly to himself, her, or them through a sticky fist. They sniff and stare at him with as much interest as they do her, but never so much as scratch him.

When a little black hatchling of a species she doesn't recognize on sight â€" not that that's anything unusual; this place is a menagerie â€" and that seems to be all head, eyes, wings, and tail crawls over to investigate the baby, she doesn't think anything of it. Dragons, it turns out, are better babysitters than most Vikings on their best day. Who would have thought it? And, having learned that and more, how could she ever go back to a world where they're killed on sight? How could she take her _son_ back to that world?

She turns her back for only a moment, one ear alert for the sounds her baby makes but the rest of her attention on the dead rabbit a 'helpful' Nightmare has just brought her. Its fur is only marginally burnt, which is an improvement. There's enough unburnt skin and hair to make a pair of small shoes for the baby.

When she turns back to said baby, she drops the rabbit in horror, crying out. The baby's hand has vanished into the little black hatchling's mouth.

She's running over to them before the rest of her brain registers that Hiccup is still making happy little noises, but her approach makes the little dragon drop the hand â€" slobbery and honey-free but still very much attached and unmarked â€" and back away, cowering and whistling.

It's only then that the baby bursts into tears. She picks him up and rocks him, petting and soothing, until he calms down to only an occasional sob, by which time the black hatchling has worked up its courage to approach them again, sidling towards mother and baby as if it expects to be yelled at again, but is determined to get there

despite that.

"It's okay," Valka tells it, freeing up one hand to beckon invitingly. "Come here, little one."

It eyes her mistrustfully.

"I'm not mad," she says, keeping her tone level and light. "Come on."

Gradually, it edges closer, huge green eyes more on the baby than on her. When she sits down on the floor, its approach speeds up, clearly drawn to the baby, who stops crying immediately at the sight of it and returns to making happy burbling noises, reaching out the same dragon-slobbered hand.

She watches, amazed and amused with the rush of relief, as dragonet nose nuzzles infant hand, and licks at it gently. Hiccup laughs outright, a baby giggle, and waves the hand back and forth, only contacting the dragon by accident but clearly enjoying it when he does. When his hand swings back into reach, the hatchling's tongue snakes out and snares it, clearly intending to pull it into its mouth again.

"No," Valka tells it, pulling her baby away.

She's instantly outvoted as dragonet and baby wail in unhappy harmony. But as the dragon cries, she notices that its open mouth is all gums. Luring it back to her with the promise of the baby in her lap "they pet each other and make baby noises together as she examines the hatchling" she finds that the little dragon has no teeth, just soft little buds.

"I've never seen a toothless dragon before," she tells it "it rolls an eye in her direction but is still fascinated by the baby.

Resigned, she puts Hiccup down and lets them play with each other. The little toothless dragon is incredibly patient with him even when he gets hold of an ear-flap and pulls, getting it all the way to his own mouth and sucking on it. In turn, the hatchling persists in mouthing at any hands in reach and licking at the baby, possibly because he tastes of honey. Valka is fine with that, as long as it isn't the taste of _baby_ that the hatchling is drawn to.

She supervises for a while, but eventually decides that little Toothless is not going to hurt the baby, and returns to working on the rabbit skin while keeping an eye on them. They fall asleep in a pile of black scales and baby freckles long before she's done.

(A year later, the name becomes completely misleading when Toothless sprouts a mouthful of little fangs that retract and spring out whenever he wants them to, at almost the same time as Hiccup's baby teeth are coming in most rapidly. But by then every third word out of Hiccup's mouth is "Too-ess!" and he's toddling around the caves hanging on to the rapidly growing little dragon for support and talking to him incessantly.)

* * *

><p>This is an ordinary morning for Valka and her son.<p>

Every time she wakes up, she vows to herself that this is the day she's going to cut her hair. She no longer has to spend most of the morning combing pine needles and bits of bracken out of it, not since she convinced Cloudjumper that she would like some sheep with skins not eaten and not burnt and not torn but dead was all right, and he convinced the rest of the flock to bring her enough to construct two good piles of sheepskin as beds for herself and Hiccup. But the long fall of hair still gets tangled as she sleeps.

She only feels slightly guilty about sending dragons out on the same sort of raids that, back on Berk, her own people would try to kill them for. When it comes to looking after her son, she will bear the guilt any day.

Every day she combs her fingers through her hair, cursing, and puts it up in a loose braid instead.

Before anything else, she needs to know where her son is. She has a fairly good idea of where he'll be, but it never hurts to check, not with how daring and fearless and creative Hiccup is growing up to be. Generally, though, no matter where she puts him to bed, he always ends up in the same nest as Toothless, now that he seems to have outgrown crawling in with her. She has given up separating them â€" it's not doing any harm, the black dragonet is always actually very careful with him even when they play rough, and it's good that he has a friend.

It's a cold, cold world out there in more ways than one, and Toothless seems perfectly happy to keep the little boy warm.

Sure enough, she finds her son and Toothless piled all over each other in a tangle of limbs and scales and grubby tunic. One of them is snoring, but she's not quite sure which. It might be both of them, in unison.

While he sleeps he's slightly less likely to get into trouble, so she lets boy and dragon be for now.

Later in the morning, she goes to wake him up. She suspects that he was running around very late last night, probably long after she thought she'd put him to bed, and reminds herself to keep a closer eye on him. Dragons wake and sleep when they will, but she is trying to keep her son on at least a somewhat human schedule. Some days it works better than others.

"Hiccup," she calls, putting a hand on his hair, "time to wake up."

The little boy opens one eye and blinks at her.

"Good morning, baby."

He whistle-chirps a dragon-like noise at her that she recognizes from the real dragons as something close to "good morning".

"Hiccup, words," she reminds him for the thousandth time. He can talk; he just prefers to sound like a dragon whenever she will let him get away with it. She can't stop him from talking directly to the

flock they have been adopted into in such a way, and is in fact slightly jealous that he has picked up so quickly and naturally a language of sorts that she is still figuring out on a moment-by-moment basis, but she expects him to use Norse to her.

He wrinkles his nose and growls.

"Hiccup!"

The little boy sighs, which turns into a yawn halfway through and ends up as a squeak. "Mornin', mama," he says clearly.

The activity has woken Toothless, who has not bothered to move except as far as necessary to bring her into his field of vision. The black dragonet whistle-chirps the same 'good morning' sound at her in exactly the same way. Dragons grow faster than humans do, and a hatchling the size of a small six-month-old has grown in the last three years to easily match up to a decent-sized pony. Valka pets him, and he purrs.

"Good morning to you too, Toothless."

She should have known she wasn't going to get away with that: Hiccup spots the hypocrisy immediately and scolds, "Toothless, words!"

Valka is very grateful that she doesn't have to point out the mistake in there – Toothless takes care of that himself, giving Hiccup a deadpan look that dares him to try to enforce that order.

After feeding him and letting the little boy play on his own time for a while, Valka ropes him into a new game which is actually teaching him to do useful things, like fixing an enormous tear in one of his battered pairs of trousers that she suspects was from a wrestling match with Toothless. He's got clever and delicate fingers and an incredible ability to focus, and he's picking up the basics of how to sew quite quickly, if roughly. Hiccup has learned already that needles are sharp – "like claws, baby, be careful" – and that they should poke the fabric, not fingers.

She manages to keep him at it for what feels like almost half an hour before she looks up to realize that the project has been abandoned and the little boy has wandered away. For a moment she almost assumes that he will be fine – every dragon in the flock adores him and looks out for him just like one of their own incredibly playful and very silly hatchlings – but reconsiders immediately. No dragon is capable of getting into as much unexpected trouble as an active three-and-a-half-year-old.

When she finds him she's simultaneously struck flat with horror and glad she went looking, making a diving leap for the boy and snatching him away from the edge of the sea cliff and clutching him in her arms. He had been all ready to jump off the big, _big_ cliff into the rough ocean below.

Hiccup wails into her ear unhappily, briefly deafening her.

"Hiccup, no!" she orders, bringing him back inside despite his struggles.

He protests, still trying to get free and back out onto the edge.
"Wanna fly! Hiccup flying!"

Valka is never letting him out of her sight ever again. She briefly wonders if he would have been this much trouble if they were still back on Berk. As she sets him down back in the cave that has become their sleeping area, which has the advantage of a comparatively small entrance that she can block any last-ditch escape attempts at by small boys, somehowâ€|she thinks so.

"No, baby, noâ€|you don't have any wings!"

His eyes go very big, and he turns in place, pirouetting as he awkwardly tries to see down his own back. "No wings?" Hiccup says disbelievingly, as if he'd never noticed their absence and was expecting wings to appear magically any second now.

"No, you don't," Valka assures him.

It doesn't stop him for very long. "Wanna have wings an' fly!" Hiccup announces argumentatively.

In some ways, although vanishingly few of them, Hiccup is absolutely a Viking â€" arguing with him is often not worth it because he'll go right for it with the stubbornness of a child who wants something, and not quit, ever. Valka thinks he's inherited that from his father, dismissing the many full-out (and quite enjoyable by both sides) screaming arguments she had had with Stoick over the years. She decides not to try arguing with their son, at least not until he's old enough to either really actively reason with or fight with interestingly. "Well, until you do have wings â€" she temporizes, because that was never going to happen, right? "â€"no jumping off cliffs."

He pouts. He probably doesn't know how adorable it is.

Valka rolls her eyes and sweeps him up again, bringing him back out into a larger area of the cave that is occupied by several dragons, including, she is pleased to see, Cloudjumper, and where Hiccup is used to playing inside. She sets the little boy on top of a medium-sized rock. "Here," she offers, "jump off this smaller rock instead inside where I can watch you."

Hiccup is sufficiently distracted, and does so, leaping down to the ground and climbing back up almost instantly.

Cloudjumper, watching, makes a noise that she is absolutely certain is a laugh. Valka beams up at him. "I know. He's only little."

Her friend rolls his eyes. She thinks he recognizes most of the words she uses â€" the dragons have been learning her language even as she and Hiccup learn theirs.

"Yes, well. Cloudjumper? Babysitting? No one is to let the baby jump off cliffs! Everyone needs to watch him, all right?"

Cloudjumper looks over her head at the little boy, pointedly. Hiccup is still jumping off the rock repeatedly and with great enthusiasm, yelling "flying!" in little-kid joy.

"That's okay. Just not off sea cliffs!"

Somewhat inevitably, given the near-constant traffic of dragons in and out and through this section of the caves and that he and Hiccup are practically inseparable, Toothless flutters in to see what his friend is doing, hovering around the peak of the rock and whistling curiously.

"Tooth'ess, flying!" Hiccup whoops with joy, and leaps straight at the black dragonet. Toothless is not yet quite big enough to catch him and keep them both in the air, although if he keeps growing at this rate he soon will be. For now, though, the midair collision knocks them both out of the air and to the ground in a squawking pile.

The little boy chatters at the dragon incomprehensibly, laughing and purring and nuzzling against him like a cat even as Toothless bats at him with remonstrative but gentle paws, and then bounces to his feet and scampers back up his flying-off rock.

Toothless stays where he is, eyeballing Valka. He doesn't have to do anything more to convey the message. This, his expression says, is your fault.

"Sorry, Toothless," Valka tells him. The little dragon huffs, climbing to a sitting position and turning his back on her. She almost believes it until she catches him sneaking glances over his shoulder to see if she notices how much he's ignoring her.

Hiccup jumps off the rock again, but this time Cloudjumper pounces right over Valka and catches him in midair by the back of his vest. Grumbling, her dragon friend stalks off with him through the caves out to the protected meadow that she thinks of as the king's open-air Great Hall, the little boy hanging from his jaws yelling with absolute joy.

"Eek! Flying, Hiccup flying!"

Toothless immediately drops his pretense of shunning them all, bounding off after Cloudjumper and buzzing around them trying to get his friend back.

Valka laughs quite hard, shaking her head. She wonders aloud to Hiccup, who is now too far away to hear her and very busy screaming with dragonish amusement in the open air: "I can't imagine what your father would have made of you."

* * *

><p>Last winter Hiccup had climbed into her lap after talking to a scarred newcomer to their island sanctuary, which had been scared of Valka but tolerant of the almost-five-year-old, perhaps because he was so much smaller and sounded like a dragon much of the time anyway, and announced to her solemnly: "It biting."<p>

A rather roundabout session of translation, using Hiccup as the go-between, later, Valka had managed to figure out that the scars on the dragon's leg and wing were from a trap and that she had torn herself loose to escape.

What she could see of the scars had been truly grotesque, and Valka had gotten deeply and passionately angry. She had managed to obtain from her little dragon translator that there were many more traps like it, and many more dragons being trapped.

When the flock figured out what she was asking about, a number of dragons found her to show her similar scars.

Looking at the injuries to beings " to people " that had cared for her son and looked after her and had altogether not been at all the monsters she'd been taught all her life that dragons were, Valka had been furious. She has resolved for some time now to journey back to Berk someday when Hiccup is older and she feels better about taking him into a war zone. Between the two of them, the chief's wife and the chief's son " the latter of which is the perfect go-between, one who can talk to dragons in their own language and humans in theirs " surely they will be able to put a stop to their war for good. She has dreams of using all they've learned and discovered here to make a difference for people she'd taken a responsibility for when she'd married Stoick.

But just then, she'd muttered to herself angrily about the cruelty of Viking trappers, overlooking the attentive boy still sitting in her lap.

Bowing before the great king of dragons, she had told him what she wanted to do and begged his permission to carry out her plan and the help of his flock.

Since then, Valka has become somewhat of an expert on dragon traps, and she has taught her son to sabotage and open them as well. His clever fingers and ability to tell frightened and angry dragons that they are trying to let them out, not hurt them further, are incredible assets to her that more than equal her greater strength and reach when it comes to physically breaking open stubborn catches or sawing through ropes. The little boy is fascinated by the machinery of the traps, turning the disassembled pieces of a lock or trigger over and over in his small hands with interest.

And the dragons " our flock! _Valka had thought unexpectedly, and smiled, understanding the joy in Hiccup's voice when he talked to them like a dragon himself " had been very helpful once they'd understood what she was doing, bringing back reports of traps set and trappers in the area the same way they reported good fishing areas and animal migrations with the passage of ships and the presence of strange dragons in their skies.

Now they have brought her news of a fresh range of traps set to the south, and Valka tracks down her active son, finding him curled up in a dragon's nest otherwise full of eggs and mother dragon, purring to her and examining the eggs with the utmost gentleness, delicate child's fingers brushing across one shell and ear pressed to another one.

"Time to break some more traps, Hiccup," she calls to him, and his head comes up over the edge of the nest curiously. "Say goodbye for now."

He whistles to the nesting dragon, and then, to her surprise, puts his cheek against the closest egg and hums a goodbye to it too.

"Can the eggs hear you?" she asks him as she carries him to where Cloudjumper is waiting to carry them away from the sanctuary.

"Uh huh," he asserts, although whether or not this is true or the product of a child's creative mind she doesn't know.

The two of them, mother and child, had spent quite some time designing a harness for a child who fundamentally cannot sit still even while on a dragon's back impossible distances up in the air above a fatal fall. The result is improvised but much safer than letting him run loose, or having Valka try to hold onto him and keep her own balance at the same time, and Cloudjumper is surprisingly good about wearing the leather straps that attach child to dragon.

Hiccup doesn't particularly like it â€" he's entirely unafraid of falling, and Valka had practically chewed the horns off a pair of dragons she'd caught flying him up into the sky and then dropping and catching him, as a _game_ he was enthusiastically participating in â€" but she gets him into it eventually over his protests. When she puts him down to retrieve her bundle of trap-breaking supplies that she has assembled over the past few months, all wrapped around a solid staff of driftwood that she had rescued from being chewed on by dragons after it had resisted said treatment, Hiccup's break for freedom is foiled when Cloudjumper sets a claw down on the trailing edge of the harness, pulling him up short and bumping him down abruptly.

The little boy collapses backwards and glares at the large red-gold dragon from there, croaking with playful irritation. Cloudjumper rumbles back at him and they argue until they are interrupted by Toothless, who has found Hiccup possibly going somewhere without him and has turned up at top speed to object to this very strongly.

The growing black dragon manages only a few seconds of wailing â€" Valka privately suspects this means something along the lines of _me too, me too, me too, me too!_ â€" before she raises a hand and says, "All right, Toothless, you can come with us if Cloudjumper doesn't mind."

Honestly, she feels like she has two sons, one who happens to be a dragon and one who seems to think he is, despite her insistence that he speak in Norse as long as he's talking to her and that he learn to use his hands in ways that only humans can, to sew and draw â€" which he took to like a shot â€" and use and understand tools like the riding harness and the triggers of traps.

Cloudjumper rolls his eyes but makes no objection to Toothless accompanying them.

Hiccup screams with joy and forgets about the harness and the claws keeping him in place, wrapping his arms around as much of Toothless' head as he can manage and purring. This conversation, whatever it's about, keeps him quite happy until Valka is ready to go.

They, and a cloud of flock-mates escorting them, go far enough that she expects the little black dragon to have to set down and take a break on Cloudjumper's back at some point, but Toothless keeps pace with the older dragons without any trouble. Valka is impressed. She

wonders where he comes from, and if his mother had brought or left him here and then flown away on her own journey. If an adult of his kind has even more stamina or love of flight than the little one does, then she could have flown over the edge of the world and back again by now. She wonders where Toothless would have ended up, what distances he would have reached, if he were not so permanently attached to Hiccup's side.

Hiccup is usually perfectly happy as long as he is in the air, but today he is restless â€" well, more restless than usual. "Fly with Toothless!" he insists.

"One day," Valka promises him. "When he's bigger. And you are."

This does not fully satisfy him, but he settles down somewhat, which puts Valka's mind a bit more at rest. They have come a long way from that first terrified flight in Cloudjumper's claws, and if â€" gods forbid â€" the boy did happen to fall one of the dragons flocking all around them would catch him before anything actually happened to him, but her instincts are to protect him and even if he doesn't worry she does. She's his mother, that's her job.

The scouts lead them to a large island that extends into the distance even from this height. As they descend, Valka scans the treetops for any indication of human interference, and directs the flock to a mountainside that seems clear.

Sliding from Cloudjumper's back and settling Hiccup on her shoulders so she can have her hands mostly free, she signals to the dragons that have accompanied them.

"Traps here," she says. "Careful. Stay down, stay still. Wait for me to call."

Cloudjumper scans the assembled dragons and growls reinforcement to her orders. They settle down and wait, watching her and sunning themselves.

"Back soon," she tells them, and sets off into the woods, looking for trappers' signs. She has begun to recognize the indicators and warnings that a particular group that has been working this area uses, and she is quite pleased to be able to use their markings to her advantage.

She's only been out of sight of the flock for a minute or so before she hears a rustling from above.

Hiccup looks up and croons happily. Valka sighs.

"Toothless, is that you?"

It's barely even a question â€" of course it is. Toothless is growing apparently endlessly and he is slightly too big to hide in the tree branches he's landed in, and has not yet learned to compensate for his increased size. It means he's mostly hidden, but not completely.

He realizes this after a moment, pokes his head out of the tree cover, and whines. Clearly he's not going to let them â€" or more probably, Hiccup â€" go anywhere without him.

Valka sighs. "Come on, then."

Toothless follows obediently in her footsteps as they travel. After a while, that becomes less helpful than ever as Hiccup continually twists around on her shoulders to chirp and croak back at the little black dragon.

Finally, she stops, takes her son off her shoulders, and puts him on Toothless' back instead.

That works out better for everyone, and they proceed with Hiccup on dragonback, still talking constantly to Toothless, but much more quietly, since Toothless' ear-flaps are right there in front of him. As they walk, Valka can also hear Toothless talking right back to him.

For most of the afternoon the odd little procession follows trail sign and looks for the telltale indications of set traps, of which there are many. She is very glad that she had instructed the expedition to stay where they had set down, because whoever is setting this trap line is clearly unable to take a hint or understand the concept of 'too many'. Vikings, Valka thinks to herself, shaking her head. Whatever else you say about them, people who live in this cold and harsh northern ocean do not quit, ever.

Toothless digs up tripwires and Valka cuts them with a freshly sharpened knife. Hiccup pulls springs loose from triggers and pockets them to play with later, humming with interest at a mechanism that is meant to grab a dragon's ankle and hold it but could easily take off his fingers. Valka snatches him away from it and hands him to Toothless to look after.

The traps are recent and the forest has not yet returned to its undisturbed state â€" it still betrays the trappers' presence. Valka is proud of her scouts. They are getting better and faster and she is pleased that no sooner have these traps gone down than her family is going to take them up again.

Whatever do they want to trap dragons for, anyway? she wonders, noticing how many of them are live traps rather than killers. She's glad of this â€" it's much easier to successfully rescue dragons when the trap is meant to keep them alive anyway â€" but the pattern puzzles her. She is uncomfortably reminded of the dragon-fighting training pit on Berk, and the captured dragons kept there for children to practice on until the dragons are worn out and killed.

She had no choice but to tolerate that on Berk, but if her scouts find a dragon-fighting pit here, she is going to take her jail-breaking efforts to a new level and they will have to burn something down.

Valka is somewhat aware that if she did this, she and hers would be raiders no different from the dragons that attacked Berk all the time. It's not a very comfortable feeling.

She will have such a lot of explaining to do when she gets home.

She is spared from further considering how she is going to explain their very un-Viking-like son to Stoick by a fluttering whining sound coming from off in the trees. Beckoning for Toothless and the boy on his back to stay close, she treads carefully, watching for hidden dangers.

But the trap has already been triggered, capturing a smallish Nadder in its jaws. The blue-dappled dragon is caught by its tail and a wingtip: the loss of either would seriously hinder its ability to fly.

It screams when it sees her, cowering away as far as it can.

"It's okay," Valka says soothingly, stretching out a hand. "I'm not going to hurt you. Hiccup? Tell our friend here we're not dangerous and we're going to help, all right?"

The little boy sits up on the black dragon's back and croons liquidly, interspersing and intertwining the sound with a chittering popping noise Valka knows her throat can't even begin to make. Whatever he's saying, it works fairly well, and the Nadder stares at him as if uncertain whether to believe its ears " which are telling it that these newcomers are not a threat " or its eyes " which are showing it humans.

When she gets a good look at the trap, she scowls. It's familiar but old and rusted and will take her time to get open. She relays this to her little translator, who passes it on. The Nadder sags as if giving up regardless of whether they represent a threat or not.

Valka grits her teeth at the touch of rust on her bare skin and gets to work. After a few minutes, she sees Toothless and Hiccup wandering off into the woods.

"Don't go far," she tells her son. "Stay where we've already been."

Either Hiccup or Toothless " she genuinely cannot tell their voices apart sometimes " whistles at her. But then the sound cuts off in mid-trill and says, "Yes, mama," so it must have been Hiccup.

Several minutes later, she is still at work on the trap and the Nadder is getting ever more agitated, making a proper racket and waving its free wing.

"It's all right," she tells the frantic creature. "I'm going to get you out of here, and I'm working as fast as I can." But although it seems to have gotten the message from Hiccup and Toothless, it continues to babble frantically in her ear as she works. Not that she doesn't make plenty of noise herself, swearing freely now that Hiccup cannot hear her " the boy mimics everything! " and wrenching at the stuck clasp with her hands and then trying to lever it open with her driftwood staff.

Finally it pops open, utterly destroying the hinge in the process, and the Nadder tears itself free and hurtles into the air, squawking. Maybe Cloudjumper and their expedition will intercept it and bring it back to the king's island, maybe they won't. In any case, it's out of the now nicely broken trap.

It is only when the dragon's shrieks stop ringing in her ears that she hears an entirely different distant scream.

She honestly cannot tell whether it is Hiccup or Toothless screaming; she can when Hiccup is happy, because he can use words that dragons cannot to talk to her, but when he's scared he panics and sounds exactly like a frightened dragon.

Valka takes off running towards the sound.

Just before she gets there, she pauses, realizing that the dragonish cries are angry rather than hurt and that charging in without knowing what she's getting into might not be a good idea. It takes all her effort of will to think this far through the sound of one â€" probably both â€" of her sons in distress, but she grips her driftwood staff in preparation and glances around the tangle of trees between her and her children.

Also between her and them are a handful of armed men, arrayed in a semicircle and trapping Hiccup and Toothless against a rocky bluff. Hiccup is standing protectively in front of the black dragon, little arms stretched out to hide Toothless as much as possible even though he's so much smaller, snarling furiously.

"It's okay, little guy," the man crouched on his heels in front of her son, one hand outstretched, says, "I've got a little boy too, and he'd love to play with your pet there. Why don't we all go together?" But the tone in his voice is avid, covetous and cruel, and Hiccup may not have much experience with humans rather than her, but his instincts are good and he bares his teeth and growls wordlessly at the trapper.

"_Get away from my sons!" _Valka roars, coming out swinging. She takes down the nearest trapper at the ankles and hears bone break. Well, this staff had survived being chewed on by dragons and used to break iron â€" the man's ankles hadn't stood a chance. The same swing drives the butt of the stick into someone else's guts and he goes down retching.

She gets in a good few more blows before her charge puts her on a collision course with the man trying to steal her little boys. He's faster than his cronies, though, and rolls out of the way before she can break his neck like she'd been trying to do.

Now it is Valka holding her ground between the trappers and the dragon. Hiccup says "Mama!" with absolute joy and relief.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," the trappers' leader says defensively, climbing to his feet and waving his hands at his men, who back off â€" although they have all drawn weapons since her first attack, and she doesn't feel that much safer. "Where did you come from?"

"Doesn't matter," Valka retorts. "You leave them alone."

"Oh, he's yours, is he? Spunky little kid. Bites, too." He holds up a bare hand on which the marks of little-boy teeth are imprinted.

Valka is _so_ proud of her son.

"Did you try to touch him?"

"Hey, lady, he came at me."

"Then I wish he'd gone for your throat."

The trapper laughs. "He was damn well trying. Hey, wait a minute. I know who you must be." His eyes drop to her hands. She knows better than to take her eyes off the men who are threatening her little family, but she knows suddenly what he must be able to see â€" the smears of rust from that ancient trap.

"You're the one who's been messing up our trap line!"

"Oh good," Valka glares at him. "I've been wanting to meet you." She shifts her hands on her staff and her feet on the ground to more stable positions to reinforce that she has not been looking for him to cook him a hearty meal.

He grins in a way he must think looks charming. "Hey, I'll tell you what. I'll call it even â€" if you give me that little Night Fury instead."

_Night Fâ€" Toothless? The nightmare of Vikings, lightning and death's child, the little dragon who adores her son and can't bear to be separated from him? Valka has never been able to put a name to Toothless' breed, but then no one knows anything about Night Furies, except that they are incredibly rare.

"I told you," Valka says, letting none of this show in her voice, "leave them alone."

"Lady," the trapper says â€" he is done being charming â€" "that little beast is worth more than I'd earn in a lifetime of trapping, and my son's lifetime too. You give him to us, or we will take him."

Valka drops her shoulders and lowers her head, letting the staff sag towards the ground. She looks down at Hiccup, who stares up at her with terrified green eyes, and Toothless, who watches her in the exact same way. She does not know what these men would do to Toothless if they got their hands on him; she knows that the loss would break Hiccup's heart; she knows that she will not let any of it happen as long as she can stand and fight and protect her family.

"Babies," she says quietly, "_run_."

She lunges for a man on the edge of the semicircle, knocking him back and opening up a gap for the black dragon to streak through with her son on his back.

"_Cloudjumper!_" _Valka yells as loud as she can.
"Cloudjumper!"_

She keeps shouting for her dragon-companion as chaos breaks out and she tries to stop anyone from going after Hiccup and Toothless, keeping the humans' attention on her. It doesn't work, and she finds herself tearing through the forest after them with a pack of dragon

trappers in close pursuit.

Cloudjumper won't be able to find her in these woods â€" they're too dense. She finds a clearing where she can swing her quarterstaff and that is open to the sky, and a moment later her sons emerge from the woods and try to head towards her.

They duck back into the undergrowth immediately when the leaders of the pursuit break out and attack her. There are too many of them and she holds them off, knowing she has only to hold her ground until Cloudjumper gets here. If he can hear her. If she has not gone too far and he can hear her cries. But dragons have good hearing and he knows her voiceâ€|

If Valka had seen it coming, if she had known what was happening, she would have blocked it, but everything goes wrong at once and something heavy hits her back and shoves through just as a familiar shadow falls over her.

And as darkness falls around her she truly can't tell which of her sons is screamingâ€|

* * *

><p>To be continued.

10. Chapter 10

ON WITH THE SHOW!

**Nightfall****, Part Ten**

If yesterday Stoick had been asked to name the worst moment of his life, and he had deigned to answer such an impudent and intrusive question, he would have named the night his wife and son were taken from him.

He has seen his people through more funerals than he would care to count, for warriors killed in battle with dragons or with rival clans and in falls from ships in storms, of babies frozen or starved or both in the killing cold of devastating winter, of mothers trying to bring those babies into the world, of old men who have withered away to their last scraps of courage and spite, of grandmothers who take with them more knowledge than they ever shared.

He has comforted those left behind when he has no answers. He has lost friends, and relatives, and people he's promised to protect and failed in that oath.

Today everything is backwards and wrong. Today the sun is dark, and water dry; the skies are shattered and fallen, the air is poison. Ice has consumed the gods who have turned on each other and fallen in meaningless battle.

The worst moment of his life has been eclipsed by one unthinkably worse.

Today his Val is dead at the hands of Vikings, and his only son lives under the care â€" the _care! _â€" of dragons and is all but a dragon

himself.

Stoick stares into the dying fire that he has not moved to feed or stoke up since it was lit by someone else " he will remember who and when, any moment now " and wonders if the fire will be cold if he puts his hands into it. For a moment the only light left in his world, the faint glow from the embers, becomes the burning hatred in the eyes of a dragon in a human skin. The fire that had been illuminating an empty house, which had so briefly contained a family and for years has harbored his memories of them and his imaginings of what could have been, becomes dragon-fire that burns it all away to ashes and the smoke of a funeral pyre.

Unable to imagine what his son would have been like as he looked at the children of his tribe and seen the apparently infinite variety that children are capable of, he has tried to hold them in the shelter of his home as dreams better than he had ever protected them in life, forever fragile but bright-eyed infant and bewildered but delighted mother, impossible son and best-beloved wife. In his mind, in this place, they have never changed, untouchable.

Until now.

He has been a warrior all his life, the chief of the tribe like his father before him, and a good one, he likes to think; he has faced monsters and hereditary enemies and friends he has been forced to cast out of the tribe before they unacceptably endanger the safety of them all. He has been argued with, disliked, challenged, and even hated by a number of people.

He has never seen such rage in living eyes as the moment when he'd raised his hands reflexively to protect himself against what all his instincts said was a dragon lunging for him, snarl tearing from its throat and claws going for his face, teeth bared and eyes flaring. The transformation from cowering child " oh, and that hurts too " to lethal animal had come almost without warning. Stoick cannot help but think that the roar that is currently tearing his heart to shreds had saved his eyes the same fate, because otherwise he would not have had enough time to block the leap.

His hands can still feel the scrape of the leather as if its texture had been burned into his skin as the animal attacking him had twisted and writhed, trying to escape his grip on the boy's gloved, lethally dragon-clawed hands or trying to attack, it had been impossible to tell.

"Val," he says, to the ghosts that are burning away in that fire even as he speaks, "didn't you see what he was becoming? Why didn't you bring him home?"

Stoick knows he will never get an answer, that anything he might want to know about what had happened to his family out there in the wilds is locked away inside the head of a creature who is half broken child and half raging dragon, both halves of which hate him and fear him and neither of which can ever tell him. The knowledge is right there, and he can never reach it.

He had wanted so desperately to know, and now he wishes just as desperately that he didn't. The image of the boy twisting away from Stoick's questions, burying himself in the skin of the nightmare

dragon rather than look at his own father, haunts him. The sound of the boy's cry of joy and delight at seeing the picture of the creature Stoick has hated for twenty years digs into his chest and roots through abysses of pain until it finds rage buried underneath.

The way he had reacted! Stoick had expected shock and for a moment he had gotten it. But then the boy had lit up like a candle-flame fed oil and started looking at the sky as if expecting to see the creature appear at any moment, making a clicking purring sound that might have been a name and obviously hoping for its arrival.

Stoick has seen that behavior in his tribe's younger children: it was the excited delight of a child whose father has come home from a long voyage at sea.

Rage flares up and becomes hate, long-held and long-nurtured but now fed as much fuel as it could ever want from an inexhaustible source.

One thing comforts him, and he feeds it to the flames that are devouring his life grimly. The dragonish boy had looked up as if he had been expecting Stoick's own personal bane to come for him.

If it does, it will find Stoick waiting, and he will put at least one thing right with his world even after it ends, as it has done.

He buries ruthlessly the memory of the joy and hope in the boy's expressive green eyes as he'd looked for the creature. His desire for over a week now for the strange boy to be his son wars with his inability to accept the reality over the dream he had constructed for years.

The dream is a child, a son, an heir. The reality is a monster, an animal, a dragon, an impossible mixture of two things that could never coexist, coiled on the ground and snarling.

But whenever he thinks this, however hard he tries to condemn the wild boy as a monster, he hears a child's voice wrapped up in that of a man's absent repetition of "Mama" all but buried beneath the impossibly gentle purrs and worried croons of a demon in the shape of a dragon, and "â€"

Val's dead! part of his mind howls around and beneath it all.
Val's actually, really dead!

For years Stoick has asked himself what Valka would think of something or what she would do if given this problem, imagining conversations with her in the moments of quiet that are rarities on Berk. In the years when she was first gone he had made mental tallies of things to share with her when he found her again, small things that people had done and strange events that had happened, old jokes he had remembered to tell her again and memories only the two of them would know. He does not remember when he had stopped doing so, when he had given up hope that he would ever get to tell her all those things, or when they had boiled down into a single thought.

I missed you, Val, he would say to her when they met again.
Welcome home, Val. I still love you, Val.

You're really dead, Val.

It isn't possible, Stoick can't believe it. He could accept that Valka was gone, he had had to. How could he have set out and scoured the entire ocean for her, with a whole island of much-harried but resolute people looking at him to lead them, protect them, to keep them alive through another starving winter and one more dragon raid?

Part of him has always expected her to show up again, on a trading vessel or walking across the rare deep winter ice, or on a nearby island, which she would have gotten to on some ridiculous contraption that would have barely survived the seas, because she would have been so driven to return home that she would have risked anything to come back.

She would have their son with her, a tall and energetic boy, fast and fierce and a fighter who would become his father's heir and his mother's protector, and they would step into the paths that their shades had walked through their family's house for so long and bring their life back to his to make it worth the name.

All of it gone in a dragon's half-human roar and the flash of claws towards his eyes and a struggling wild creature briefly trapped in the chief's hands for the first time since it was small enough to be cradled entirely in those hands, trying to escape again even as it screamed with hatred and bloodlust.

On balance Stoick almost prefers the Night Fury, which at least he understands up to a point. It's a dragon, a predator, a killer. That it obviously dotes on the boy who curls up in its paws and uses it to draw on, that it protects him when he's upset or threatened, that it lets him ride on its back and care for its wounds, that it gentles under his hands and speaks back to him in soft tones is an aberration, its true colors revealed in the flare of green hatred in its eyes to match the dragon-boy's accompanying a snarl promising a very painful death, and the screaming fire boiling from its throat around teeth as sharp as new-forged swords, ready to kill when provoked.

It's clever, the beast, but Stoick is not fooled.

Mama, a small voice says through all this, and his hatred is overwhelmed by grief again. If things had been different, would that voice have said _Father_, or _Dad_?

Would it have been a Viking, and not a dragon, if that creature hadn't â€

And he comes around to the dragon from twenty years ago again, the one who had stolen his family from him in more ways than one.

Stoick wonders if he can put Astrid in charge of Berk right now and sail away to find this creature wherever it has laired all these years with his son imprisoned in its grasp and his wife's blood on its claws, except that â€

Pfikingr do! howls the wild boy, in his memories of the worst moment of his life.

Child or creature, monster or victim, he cannot decide. The dragon-boy never shows the same face to his grief for more than a moment at a time, and all seem to be equally true.

Distantly, he becomes aware of a sound on the edges of his hearing, and a movement out of the corner of his eye. Uncaring, he stares at the coals that have long since gone out.

After a few more repetitions, the noise starts to make sense. "Chief?" Astrid is asking him, in the tone of someone who has said the same thing many times before.

"Not now," he says dully. So that was why Astrid had suddenly come to mind.

"It's _important_; I â€"

"Handle it yourself," Stoick cuts her off, turning away.

"But â€"

He turns on her with a hand out to stop her where she stands. "I. Don't. Care," he says harshly. "My wife is dead, my son a monster. Go away."

She backs away, and he goes back to staring at the cold, dead fire in the cold, empty house.

The door slams, and he doesn't flinch.

"No," says Astrid.

The big Viking chieftain growls, refusing to look up but forced to acknowledge her presence. "What are you still doing here?"

"Handling it myself. Get up, chief. Your people need you. Grieve on your feet."

Stoick can't count how many times he's said that to people, and he can't be bothered to try to count now. "Don't you dare say those words to me," he says threateningly.

"Then don't make me say them again."

He bellows, suddenly enraged, and snatches up the nearest thing to hand and throws it at her as hard as he can.

Considering the many edged and heavy weapons he keeps in here, she's fortunate that it's only a plate, and he misses anyway as she dodges adroitly, leaving the ceramic to smash against the door behind her in the dark. "You can do better," she dares him.

Stoick is _so_ angry that he almost takes her up on it, and he has another plate in hand and ready to throw before he realizes what she's done.

"Damn you, Astrid," he grumbles, looking at the plate in his hand as if he's not sure how it got there. "You're going to get yourself hurt someday."

"Already have," she says immediately. "Survived. Learned to dodge faster. Care to try me?"

He drops the plate rather than throwing it at her. It breaks anyway, which he supposes is an acceptable compromise. "No. Get out of here."

His hand is in the air to stop her next remark almost before her mouth is open to make it. "_I_," he says pointedly, "will be right there."

Her slim shoulders drop ever so slightly with relief. "Good choice," she dares to say. "Gobber was next in line to talk to you if you wouldn't listen to me."

"_Out_ Astrid."

Although he is suddenly much more appreciative of her methods, considering the possible alternatives his old friend might have come up with, even if he is down two perfectly good plates.

* * *

><p>When Stoick emerges from his house he is taken aback by the brightness of the sunlight. Hadn't the blazing thing gone down at some point? Or is this now tomorrow? He blinks and squints against the light for a moment, until his eyes clear and he can immediately see the problem that Astrid wants him to come and deal with.<p>

Fortunately, it is a situation that requires being able to shout louder than anyone else rather than one that calls for tact and diplomacy. Stoick is not feeling very tactful right now.

From the headland his house is built on (give or take a few reconstructions over the years), he has a clear line of sight into the bay, where several ships from the island's fishing fleet seem to be attempting to tie up in the same place at the same time.

Now, while this may sound like a relatively minor problem, it is rapidly becoming actually a bigger mess than it really needs to be, because several years ago, someone clever â€" Stoick does not quite remember who, although he needs to track him or her down and rub the appropriate nose in this mess right now â€" had figured out that the fishing vessels could store more fish after they'd caught them if they carried more boats with them. As a consequence, every longboat sent out fishing in the waters of the Archipelago and beyond, if the winds are right (or very wrong), goes stocked with more outrigger boats and small vessels than people, and on a good day with the right wind in a fair current like the one leading conveniently just past Berk, fishing vessels may come back with entire little fleets of small boats being towed along in their wakes, ideally filled with fish and covered with canvas to keep off anything looking to help itself.

So there are not currently _three_ ships competing for the same space, with much yelling of insults and claims of precedence â€" because we have the bigger haul, don't you know, can't you see, are you blind or just stupid? â€" and waving of arms and axes alike, and a collision that is about to happen between two of the bigger ones

any moment now. No, there are dozens, most of them with no ability to steer on their own and laden with fish.

It is exactly the sort of stupid thing Stoick can count on his Vikings to do, and exactly the sort of problem that needs to be shouted at extensively.

On the one hand, their return is wonderful: he can feed his people for a little while longer with their catches. On the other hand, their idiotic jockeying to be the first to return with said catch is going to end up with all of it in the bay, and salvaging capsized boatloads of dead fish out of cold ocean water is fun only for the very crazy. On a third hand, which might have to belong to Astrid as he delegates, is anyone watching the skies in case the local dragons decide to show up and eat it all while his people scream at each other? They might as well all be standing around yelling, "Free lunch!"

â€|which admittedly had worked for a while, until the dragons had caught on.

Regardless, it is solid ground Stoick desperately needs beneath his feet right now. It's a real problem with a real solution, and if that solution happens to involve cracking the heads of some more than usually argumentative ship captains together until they ring and then throwing the spectators, who are standing around on the pier laying bets on which small boat is going to capsize first or who is going to get knocked overboard, into the water to go cut those small boats loose and tow them away out of immediate dangerâ€|well, all for the better. It does mean he has to listen to the usual complement of good ketch/good catch jokes from people who have been telling the same jokes all their lives and still haven't caught on to the fact that none of them are funny, but that is something he can deal with.

Grieve on your feet. What in Hel's forsaken realm had he known about it when he'd come up with that?

For a while, then, he can think about boats. Boats don't care if his world has just turned upside down or that somewhere on his island there's a boy who should have been human and instead is a dragon, they don't know that his wife is dead, murdered by humans rather than killed by dragons like he'd half-believed for so long but hoped against the whole time anyway, and they wouldn't care if they did. Boats are boats. Boats don't care._

Stoick wishes he didn't either. Being human hurts. For the first time he wonders if it's easier to be a dragon.

What do dragons have to worry about, except where the next meal is coming from, which is too often right here?

Anyone who comes to see what all the fuss and shouting is about â€" and Vikings cannot resist free entertainment, especially when it involves fuss and shouting â€" is immediately roped into helping get all these fish in somewhere safe from dragons. That's quite literal in at least one case as a net fight breaks out and is broken up again by the chief, who grabs all the nets and physically drags the brawling crews over to help unload the boats the swimmers are bringing in. As he does so he roars at them that he doesn't care

_which ship brought in more fish or who had caught the biggest one or that someone had shot a dragon out of the sky when it came to see if it could steal some of their catch, save it for the party!

This remark, of course, spreads much quicker than anything _else_ the chief has said, and Stoick finds much to his surprise that he seems to have announced a feast that he doesn't feel remotely like participating in, much less organizing or even being on the same island as. Maybe he can borrow one of the rapidly emptying fishing boats and leave until his people are done being happy. He can't face that right now.

Fortunately, Vikings can throw a party all by themselves, and people who were avoiding the work suddenly decide to join in as long as there's a feast at the end of it for them.

Astrid has taken up a defensive position on one of the upper ramps and distributed armed guards across the rest of them, keeping a watch out to sea and up over the bulk of the island as much as on the people below. When he looks back, she's disappeared, only to reappear a moment later at his elbow.

"Chief? I'll be right back. We're missing some people who should really be here, mostly because I don't want them to be anywhere else."

"Oh?" Stoick surveys the busy crowd. "Like who?"

She grimaces. "Look around. Has anyone managed to tangle themselves in a net and ended up hanging in it from a mast yet?"

He sees her point immediately. "No twins."

"And no Snotlout. Some of his buddies, but not him. And no one is keeping an eye on them."

Stoick has a very bad feeling about this. "You think â€œ"

"That I had better run right now for the western shore? Good idea, Chief. The guards can handle themselves, because if they don't, I'll be very upset when I get back, and they know it."

She takes off running.

* * *

><p>Snotlout really wishes he hadn't brought the twins with him. Wander around in the woods with Ruffnut, yes. Wander around in the woods with Ruffnut and Tuffnut, no. Not that he'd actually invited them. They'd invited themselves, just because they happened to run into him, with that uncanny ability the twins had to be where they weren't wanted at the moment when they were most unwanted.

Well, he'd sort of run into them.

"That's a big sword," Ruffnut had said out of nowhere, appearing in much the same way.

Snotlout hadn't even gotten a chance to make a joke out of that

before her brother had appeared on his other side and announced, "If you're going dragon hunting, Astrid's gonna kick your butt. She's kind of bossy like that."

Astrid, Snotlout thinks, is gorgeous â€" but an arrogant know-it-all; bossy isn't the half of it.

For a while, Snotlout had wanted Astrid's job. Being the chief sounded pretty good to him; he'd be in charge and could shout at people and go wherever he wanted to. After a few months of listening to him complain whenever her back was turned but he knew she could hear him, Astrid had proposed a bet. She would be him for one day, and he would be her, and if he still wanted to be the chief-in-training by the end of the day they'd talk about it. How hard could it be? So he'd agreed, and she'd made sure everyone in the village knew about it.

Only afterwards had Snotlout suspected that he'd been set up. It wasn't possible to have so many dumb questions and boring things to deal with in one day, and by noon he'd been desperately hoping for an attack of dragons, or an eclipse of the sun, or Ragnarok at that, to just make it stop. He'd never been so bored in his life, and that was saying something.

And he hadn't seen Astrid anywhere the whole day â€" he rather suspected that she had just never gotten out of bed at all. That had probably been Astrid being funny. Well, he wasn't laughing.

"I'm not going dragon hunting," he'd said defensively to the twins, not that contradicting them ever made any difference. "What makes you think I'm going dragon hunting?"

"'Cause you're going west?" Ruffnut had said like it was a question. "And you sound like an ironworks when Tuffnut's knocking things over. Which is always."

All right, so Snotlout had been carrying quite a few weapons, including his favorite big sword, as Ruffnut had observed. It had occurred to him that he owed the dragon and its monster companion a few scars of their own from it.

"Hey! I only knocked over Gobber's stupid shelves because you pushed me! And then you fell into them because you tripped over your hair or something stupid! And you smell like an ironworks, too."

It had taken a moment for Snotlout to realize that Tuffnut had addressed that last comment to him. Not that it had mattered, because Ruffnut had instantly retorted, "No, that's your hair."

"No, that's your hair!"

"Is not! You dunked me in the well. People will hear you coming from way off, and so will that dragon," she'd switched effortlessly to advising Snotlout. "You should be sneakier."

"Yeah! Like us!"

After watching for a few minutes, Snotlout had not been entirely sure what part of rolling around in somersaults on the ground whenever someone looks at them, tiptoeing elaborately, shushing each other

loudly, and looking around suspiciously could be counted as sneaky, but he knew that next to them, no one would look at him twice. Or even once.

Sure enough, someone corralled the twins to ask what they were up to, since anyone acting that suspiciously had to be up to something, and Snotlout congratulated himself on his escape from both the town and the twins, heading off to do what should have been done a week ago and kill a monster.

But they'd somehow reappeared again before he'd gotten there, which is why Snotlout is trying to sneak up on an incredibly deadly dragon despite two of the loudest people on Berk following him.

"Quiet!" he tells them finally. "The whole island can hear you."

"That'd suck," says Tuffnut. "Astrid's going to be so annoyed." Ruffnut giggles, although what exactly is funny about Astrid being mad at them isn't clear.

"Shut up."

With two temporarily quiet twins in tow, he leads the way to the rocky shoreline where the three of them had first found the cave the dragon is reportedly nesting in. From the ground, the cave is completely invisible, and the fallen rocks sloping down to the water provide plenty of hiding places, if it's even here.

He risks a peek over his shoulder and notices that the twins are competing with each other to be the most determinedly and overdramatically silent. It's only now that he notices neither one of them is armed. They're probably planning to head-butt it to death, or shout at it, if they've thought about it at all.

"Did you bring anything to fight a dragon with?" he asks.

"Sssh!" they both tell him in unison.

Fine. He'll save both their skins when that thing attacks. Snotlout draws his sword and swings it a few times, getting ready as he advances on the empty coast step by step. He likes fighting dragons, he's good at it. He has been desperate to fight this one since the moment it fell from the sky; he wants to be the first Viking to kill a Night Fury.

Now, if only he knew where it was.

Unfortunately for him, the next sign of life (that isn't one of the twins doing her very best to fall into a tide pool) happens to be Astrid, who appears at the end of the vaguely defined path panting slightly, as if she'd been running.

"Snotlout!" she roars, at a surprisingly impressive volume for such a small woman who's at least slightly out of breath.

"Sssh!" the twins tell her, way too caught up in the moment as usual.

Astrid glares at them.

"He started it," they both say instantly, pointing at Snotlout, who is quite obviously standing out in the middle of a beach they'd been forbidden to go to, with a big sword.

Traitors.

"Really?" she asks him. "What part of 'stay away from the Night Fury and the dragon rider' did you not understand?"

"Keeping 'im all for yourself, huh?" Ruffnut says. "Is he cute?"

Astrid's face is utterly indescribable. She looks at Ruffnut like she's never seen the other Viking woman before and doesn't particularly want to now, because her eyes and ears are clearly lying to her and no one quite so clueless could ever exist.

It's an excellent look. Snotlout is quite impressed. He must see this look more often.

"One," Astrid says deliberately, "_ew._ Two, _EW._ Threeâ€|"

One sharp punch puts Ruffnut down on the rocky, gravelly, wet sand instantly.

"â€" go home!"

Ruffnut is undeterred. She sits back up, wiggles her jaw back and forth, pulls a face at her twin, who is gloating at still being on his feet when she's not, and pipes up again, "So is he?"

"_Get lost!_"

The twins get lost, although as they go Snotlout can clearly hear them arguing about whether they're actually going back to the village or if they're going to really go and get lost, because if they go back to the village someone will probably make them do something boring like gutting fish, and the villagers are _so_ not cool about knife fights with fish-gutting knives on the table even though the fire that had gotten started when someone ("You did!" â€" "No, you did!") kicked over a candle had made things so much more interesting, and they were going to cook the fish _anyway_, weren't they? and it had only been a _small_ fireâ€|

"Don't make me punch you too," Astrid warns Snotlout. "It's been a bad couple of days and I really want to hit someone."

They have hit each other before. Astrid hits quite hard for someone so much lighter than he is.

"I can go get Tuffnut back for you," he offers hopefully.

Astrid has a wide assortment of glares, but the _you-are-stupid-and-I-hate-you-go-away-right-now_ one gets a lot of use.

Snotlout gets lost too, although not as literally as the twins do, who don't show up in the village again until it's almost dark, with twigs in their hair and mud on their clothes and a number of

interesting bruises and the really good excuse of having walked into a net trap and been stuck in a tree in it for most of the day.

* * *

><p>"I'm sorry," says Astrid to the empty beach. "I didn't know."<p>

She wonders if the boy, who now is definitely the chief's lost son, or at least had been at some point, is so very much more dragon than human because he was hiding from the nightmare buried inside his memories.

"We didn't mean to hurt you. I want you to like us. We need you. I know you don't understand what I'm saying, if you can even hear me, but you could help us a lot.

"Please forgive me."

She's not sure she's ever said that to anyone before. But Hiccup is so inhuman most of the time, and so very much not here at this exact time, that she feels like he doesn't even count.

The shore is silent, except for waves and wind. Even the sound of the twins retreating into the distance, bickering the entire way, has faded from her hearing.

Astrid should go back and help with the fishing fleet.

She should make sure that Snotlout actually left like she had told him to, and isn't about to jump out of concealment with that oversized sword and a reckless scream even though he's terrible at hiding " too much of a showoff.

She should keep an eye on the chief to make sure that the pain he was feeling " that she knew he was feeling, that she had seen as they left the beach yesterday with the dragon-boy's wails of hatred and pain and grief echoing through their heads and he didn't say a word to her, just walked away and into his house and closed the door behind him without even looking at her " stayed hidden from their people, because anything that shook a leader's foundations shook those of the tribe as well. Who would stand for them if their leader couldn't stand strong himself? Or herself " Astrid has spent most of today and a good part of yesterday covering for Stoick and making sure no one else suffered because of the chief's pain.

She does none of this. Out of habit and curiosity and, she admits only to herself, sympathy, she goes to sit down on the same rock where she had, at whatever distance, worked with wild, broken, lost Hiccup before.

Mama go"Pfikingr do!" her memories whimper and then roar, as Stoick asks after the fate of his wife.

"No wonder you're afraid of me," she says to the rocks and the sea.

Sometime later, she still hasn't been able to bring herself to move. Astrid is the leader-in-training for a close-knit village that has more people in it than might be expected, despite all the hardships

they face. There is always someone who wants something from her, expects her to do something, expects her to be something. It's no more than she does to herself, but it is one more thingâ€|

"I sent them away," she says. "I don't think they'll come back. Not anytime soon, anyway."

Still nothing. She doesn't hold out much hope that the dragon-boy will want anything to do with her. Surely he and his Night Fury companion had fled at the first sign of strangers, since Snotlout hadn't been blasted to little burning shreds by a dragon protective of its rider, one it â€" he â€" so obviously loves.

Astrid is almost jealous. She hates dragons. She does. She's fought them all her life and she'll probably die fighting them. But she lost her parents early, and her favorite uncle later in life â€" she does not remember anyone ever holding her and loving her the way the Night Fury loves Hiccup, unconditionally and devotedly.

Dragon or no. As impossible as it seems, she has no choice but to accept it. Toothless fights for him, protects him, not only lets the boy pet him but encourages and desires the contact, and plays with him. He flies on the dragon's back, a concept Astrid still can't even imagine, not having ever seen it for herself.

After yesterday, she is absolutely sure that if she is ever in a position to do so, it will be because they are fleeing Berk as fast as they can.

"I'm sorry," says Astrid again, and then says something she hates to say, but her honor demands it of her. "I was wrong. And so is he. You're not a monster. There's something very wrong inside you, but you're not a monster. Either of you."

She is talking to no one. With no one watching her, Astrid drops her head to her bent knees, closes her eyes, and sighs a long and tired sigh.

When she looks up, Toothless is standing on the shore watching her.

Astrid gasps, reflexively. He is staring, not threatening, not snarling, not preparing to blast her from the rock, but there is something about the Night Fury's eyes that hits some weak and vulnerable fear she did not know she had. They're too intelligent. If he decides to kill her, it will be because he has thought about it and chosen that he wants her dead.

"Toothless?" she says, wondering why her voice has made it into a question â€" surely there's no other dragon like this one, especially with that one wing still trailing. "Is Hiccup all right?" She looks around the shoreline but cannot see the dragon-boy.

Until a shadow on the dragon's back, all but invisible in his own black scales and worn leather, moves slightly at the sound of his name and uncurls, and she sees the dragon-boy's face glance at her, then pull away again.

They make no demands of her or attack; they do not even look at her after that announcement of their presence. Toothless wanders away

down the shoreline and curls up on a rock that protrudes over an area of deeper water. She sees Hiccup slip from his back and settle himself in the curve of the dragon's body " then he vanishes from her sight again as Toothless wraps a wing over him.

"All right," says Astrid. "No lessons today. I didn't even bring you any food, and I should have, with all those fish. You'd just eat them raw, wouldn't you? If you didn't give them to Toothless instead. And you would."

She sits very quietly as the afternoon wears on. It's oddly relaxing, which she could never have imagined would be a term she'd use about any environment that includes a living dragon out of nightmares.

Eventually, she notices movement in an area that the waves have pounded flat to leave an expanse of silt that has currently dried until the next time the tide sweeps over it. Hiccup is hunched over it drawing something at length. Curious, she watches him. When he moves away, back to Toothless, who welcomes him back, she ventures off her rock and carefully approaches whatever he'd been drawing, keeping an eye on dragon and rider all the way there.

When she gets there the space is full of designs and drawings, some of which she can't begin to interpret. But the pure unhappiness in most of them is clear. Astrid can't explain, even to herself, why they are unhappy, but just looking at most of his work makes her throat catch and her chest hurt, quite against her will. She wonders if this is Hiccup thinking out loud, and wonders what it must be like inside his head right now. She realizes she has no idea, except that apparently dragons " or humans who think they are dragons " know how to hurt and grieve. There's sorrow in there, and longing, and fear, and she doesn't want to emphasize this much with him. She doesn't.

Some of it is recognizable. She sees Toothless several times, roughly drawn because of the unreliability of muddy sand rather than any inability to draw the dragon. She thinks she recognizes the dragon that Stoick had drawn to show to him, although she can't remember what Hiccup had called it or even hope to pronounce it, in all likelihood. She might even see herself, a crude figure sitting down.

Some areas have been violently blotted out, silt smeared flat or fingers dug into whatever had been there like claws as if he'd been trying to fight or destroy whatever thought had made it from his mind to his hands.

There are multiple small shapes that she thinks might be the Terrible Terrors that like to visit him. One picture baffles her completely. It's a dragon, but not one she's seen before " smaller than Toothless, and invariably accompanying him, but bigger than the Terrors, with small wings and an attempt at the texture of scales, but no tail.

Something occurs to her.

"Is this you?"

The dragon-boy nestled against the dragon's side ignores her, looking

out to sea and making very soft noises to Toothless that Astrid can't hear at this range. Only the faintest hint of it gets to her.

"This is you. You really do believe, don't you?"

Astrid doesn't know what to make of that, so she keeps looking at the pictures. She's not quite sure what she's looking for, but the strangeness of it all " but just on the edge of half-familiar " keeps her looking.

She squints at something that is vaguely dragon-shaped, but not quite. It takes her a moment to work out what it is supposed to be, and then it hits her.

It's a Zippleback, a two-headed dragon, but the heads have long hair and Viking-helmet horns.

"Um, yes, I suppose so," she says, looking directly at Hiccup, who won't look at her. But she thinks he's listening. "The twins. Yes. They're weird. Sorry about them." Astrid looks at the drawing again. "Is this a question? There's no way you just made a joke. I don't even know if you can do that, and the rest of this is far too upset for you to try to be funny right now."

She knows he doesn't understand her words. But "

Astrid wonders what he'll do with the drawing next, if anything. She picks up the discarded stick and holds it out to him " she sees the barest flash of eyes at the movement " then puts it down and moves away back to her rock.

Some more time goes past, but she's patient. She's learning to be, challenging her warrior self, who prefers action and consequences and immediate effects, the more time she spends trying to interact with Hiccup. She wishes she'd insisted on more time before Stoick had tried to talk to him; she can't help thinking that how badly that had gone had been her fault for not teaching him more or getting through to him better. She knows it's not, but her pride suffers even at the suggestion. Astrid had decided some time ago that she will be a better chief some day if she can be patient as well as shout at people (even if those people are Ruffnut, Tuffnut, Snotlout, or the many other frustratingly crazy and infuriating people who inhabit Berk) and fight her people's enemies, and she has always been meaning to learn. She had never imagined that a wild boy who is essentially a dragon would be teaching her as much as she is teaching him " maybe more.

It helps that she will never have to admit this to him. Or anyone, ever.

He eventually returns to the drawing, making a few changes and retreating from it again.

Astrid can't wait. Are they almost having a conversation? But she approaches it carefully, not wanting to scare him away again by running at him. She's only now come to realize how much she must frighten him.

He's added more shapes and lines and shadows that even scratched into the sand mean pain. But there's now also a line encircling the

Zippleback twins, and she can't make any sense of it at all.

"No, I'm sorry, Hiccup, I don't know what you mean," she calls to him.

He shrugs â€" a movement that seems to be universal whether he thinks he's a dragon or a human â€" and vanishes beneath Toothless' wing again. The dragon sticks his nose under it to lick or nuzzle him, or maybe just to talk to him.

Astrid lets her mind wander. If she were curious about the twins, if she thought in terms of dragonsâ€¦ what would she want to ask that could only be expressed as a circle around a dragon?

"Oh!" she realizes. "It's an egg! A single egg! Yes, Hiccup, they're twinsâ€¦ do dragons have twins?" They must, because he's tried to ask. Butâ€¦

"Hiccup, Vikings don't come from eggs."

She sees his eyes emerge from beneath the dragon's wing again. He looks puzzled and surprised. Had he understood what she'd just said? And why out of all things were they talking about this?

Still, it's better than trying to think about the heartbreak scrawled across the sand.

Even at this distance, she can see him grimace the way he does when he's trying to get his mouth around words he doesn't naturally say. "_Pfikingr_", he manages after a moment, "nuh ekkk?"

"No. No egg."

He looks at her like she's just announced that the sky is made of rocks, and then as if she's followed that absurdity up with the proclamation that all those rocks were going to attack him now, an outrageous and threatening proposition that she couldn't possibly actually mean. _He really doesn't have any idea how expressive his face is, does he?_ she wonders. Part of her mind tries to clean up what she sees and tries to make it human rather than just human-shaped.

Gods _damn_ Ruffnut. A certain malicious trickster _must_ have had a hand in coming up with her; there is no other possible explanation.

He might be, at that, under it all. But there's too much of the animal to him, she thinks, and she suspects there always will be.

Anyway, if she is going to say such clearly nonsensical things, he is apparently going to give up on understanding her, asking her things, or even paying attention to her at all more than his usual awareness of her presence as a possible threat. He does not reappear from beneath the dragon's wing for what must be hours, and Astrid is just about to give up and go back to the village â€" it's getting dark and the water is rising â€" when she sees him reappear briefly only to dive into the pool below Toothless' rock, reemerging with a fish that he offers to the dragon before himself.

"Sorry," says Astrid, quietly. "I'll be back tomorrow if you're still here."

She actually hopes he will be. Maybe all is not lost and she can still convince him to send the dragons that plague her people away.

Maybe he's still the key.

* * *

><p>To be continued.

****Author's Note of Appreciation:**** SlateDragon over on deviantART has done some lovely fanart for this story and given me permission to tell you all about it: it can be found at http: (double slash) (triple w) dot deviant art dot com (slash) art (slash) Dragon-Boy-468127470_ "you'll just have to remove the spaces and translate as per this site's rules because it won't let me submit the link otherwise. Fanart is awesome, because I have no artistic talent whatsoever, so if you want to do art for this story please do so, just let me know that you have so I can thank you! I will always ask permission before sending people to wherever you post it. (Tithenanniss, do you want people sent to your picture on tumblr?)

11. Chapter 11

ON WITH THE SHOW!

Nightfall****, Part Eleven****

The storm wakes them with a flash of lightning and the crack of thunder right above them, and two heads come up from sleep filled with nightmares to identical alertness, vibrating with excitement and surprise at the sound of it.

They love storms. Where others will hide from the sky's wrath Hiccup and Toothless, halves of a whole, embrace them and love them and challenge them. The sound of the sky roaring at them and the flashes of its claws striking at them is daring them to face it as the smell of the wind blowing in from the sea into their cave sets them free, because this is a safe space that they can hide in away from the nightmares that are pfikingr killers-of-dragon-family and the sickbadwrongthing that is still out there, but it is a hiding place that is a trap, where the wind cannot reach them and they cannot fly.

Toothless cries storm-air-warning joy excitement challenge storm-air rough-winds challenge fierce daring and his dragon-boy-half shakes with their need to take off into the storm and fly with it, making sounds of want want want want that are all but lost under the roars of dragon and sky.

Safer to stay and wait to heal more but they need to go and they have been afraid too long, grounded too long, trapped in this place filled with nightmares too long. They cannot count or articulate three weeks now but they do understand too long, too many. If it hurts them, if it kills them, they must fly, they must; and they'll

fall together if they fall.

Hiccup misses flight the way a human might miss walking if abruptly deprived of it. The sky is his natural habitat and, one way or another, he has lived in it most of his life, whether on the back of his dragon-love Toothless or with the wind gliding under his own wings as he catches thermals and rides sea breezes. He has been carried by flock-mates in joyful and exhilarated waking and he has slept undisturbed in the careful paws of Cloudjumper as they fly home.

Being trapped on the ground has been driving them mad, and there is enough madness in this place without it.

In an instant Hiccup is on the bigger dragon's back and they dash out into the wind. Toothless stops on the lip of the ledge and roars back at the storm, accepting its challenge.

They are immediately soaked as if they have been fishing for hours but they don't care, and the heat of the black dragon's heart-fire and the flame of excitement in their souls keeps back the cold of the northern rain. Toothless charges into it, leaping from rock to rock and galloping across treacherous slopes heedlessly, carelessly, too quick and too exhilarated to fall, and his companion keeps his balance instinctively and readily, urging him on and screaming his own sounds of joy into the storm.

They run run run! and the wind follows them. Dragon and dragon-boy mark every gust and map every pattern completely unconsciously as they go, heading across open spaces to feel the wind and climbing ever upwards, looking for the highest point they can find to launch from.

In the dark and the wind and the speed it's almost like flying, and the sensation only increases their desire to fly again. For the first time since they crashed they are not afraid, and for a few moments nothing can scare them. They are in their element. They can forget the nightmares they've both been having, which are getting worse the longer they are on the ground, like being shouted at from within their heads, relentless and never stopping, getting louder when they sleep and shadowing their movements during the day, waiting to strike like a soaring enemy far above between them and the open sky. The surrounded and the grounded have eaten away at them but in the heart of the storm in the dark as they run they are free again.

They have explored this island extensively in the past few weeks, even staying away as they have done from anywhere that there are too many pfikingr " like the nest on the other shore that they have seen from afar several times since the night they fled from it, and where the dragon-killers will all be hiding from the storm, so tonight the pair of dragons are free. Toothless heads for the biggest cliff he can remember. If he must be on the ground he will make it regret keeping him there, and his claws dig into the earth and tear through it as he runs, head down and wings in tight and his Hiccup-beloved on his shoulders where he belongs, pressed close to his scales and crying out in pure joy at the race and that they are together to race it.

Up up up up up! Hiccup yowls with delight as they ascend a bluff that overlooks the sea and faces into the wind that is pushing at

them tonight, urging them into the sky. They are answering it as fast as they can.

When they reach the edge that overlooks a great and distant fall to the rough waves below they gulp in the storm air and the taste of lightning as if dying of thirst, which they may as well be. Toothless paces back and forth, judging the wind as it moves and changes, anxiously waiting for the right moment to launch. He does not dare to take off from the ground on his own yet, not on the wing that is still healing, if rapidly. Although they do not know this, and neither do the humans, dragons' wings are so essential to them that they have evolved to heal quicker than almost anywhere else on their bodies. Everything from their nature to their own minds is urging dragon and dragon-boy back into the sky.

But the wind will carry them and make their launch easier, and maybe, just _maybe_â€|

The black dragon trembles like a cat about to pounce, tail lashing furiously as his wings spread and his partner-love on his shoulders sets himself for flight, tension of his own running through Hiccup's shoulders and back as learned reactions and lifelong empathy pull on muscles as if trying to spread wings that are not there, never grew, and exist only as reflections of his own desperate need to fly, so much so that he made them be rather than wait any longer. But his body still reacts as if they were there, and part of him still believes that one day they will be. When that happens, he will be ready, his body will already know how to use them; he has learned from the way Toothless moves his body and has learned to reflect it in his own.

They hunt the wind. They hunt the sky. They will catch it like the biggest fish of all.

They could hurt themselves even more doing so â€" the wing is not yet fully healed â€" but the risk is worth it for the chance to not be afraid for a little while, and the chance to fly again.

They must succeed, they must fly again, and Hiccup will do anything to make that happenâ€|even stay on the ground.

He slips from his dragon-love's back and steps away.

Toothless whips away from his stalking of just the right wind to stare at his other half in surprise, chattering, _You up you we fly us flying go flying we fly storm storm good storm flying!_

The dragon-boy struggles to communicate that Toothless will be lighter without him on his partner's back, weighing him down, and that the wind can blow him more easily if it is only trying to lift Toothless. _Flying you flying storm-air good no helping go Hiccup you flying no storm-air_â€|he chirrs and whimpers, at a loss for words he can use, gesturing and posturing as he tries to explain. They carry things with them sometimes when they have been hunting for the flock or raiding for things Hiccup wants or when the nest's hatchlings get tired and try to rest on them to be carried, and Hiccup understands that it is harder for heavier things to fly. He has trouble explaining this knowledge; it is too abstract.

His partner understands him anyway, cutting off his frustrated whines

with a sharp snap at the dismounted dragon-boy. _You!_ Toothless orders. _No no no you me we fly us together together together yes good you up us fly us we fly!_ And he sits down sharply, glaring through the dark of the rain.

Either they fly together, or they do not fly at all.

You me we us together good good safe comfort worry safe you me together, Toothless croons, point made, and nuzzles his Hiccup-self, who wraps his paws around the bigger dragon's head and touches their noses together, singing back _love love love adoration devotion love joy together yes yes flying good love you love_.

Reassured, Hiccup takes his place on the black dragon's shoulders again, chirping into the wind even as he does that _good flying good happy flying falling bad bad bad uncertainty ready-me-launch-sound together glide-together_, a mixture of concepts and ideas and emotions and some long-established cues for when they are flying together and Hiccup needs to tell the other dragon that he is going to do something, like leap from his back and glide alongside him for a while.

Toothless huffs, laughing a dragon-laugh. He understands the joke buried in that, and the _other_ joke behind that. _You careful you?_

Hiccup drums his paws on his partner's skull briefly and purrs, the sound more a feeling running through them both as a vibration against the noise of the storm.

Their laughter and joy and the wind from the sea and the rain drenching them as they anticipate flying again washes away the weight and pain of the last many days and nights they have been grounded here. _Want â€" Hiccup cries out, dreaming of the day when they are properly free again. _Want â€"!_

The wind is good, coming at them just right and catching Toothless' wings perfectly when he spreads them properly, which feels completely and absolutely right as the cramps and imbalance stretch away. The dragon shrieks into the wind for joy, hearing his delight matched perfectly by his partner.

He rears to his back feet as if preparing to pounce on the wind like prey that they are hunting and know that they will catch if they do it just right.

Fly! Hiccup roars, and they do.

Tonight they have only to ride the storm wind and it will carry them just as Toothless carries Hiccup when they are flying, and that _is_ flying and it is good. Tonight they are only really gliding and letting the wind bear them, subject to the wind and where it sends them until they can jump to another wind that the sky is full of, but it is glorious and perfect like the first breath of air after a deep dive, or the return to the warmth of a nest full of their kin when the ice is thick in the water and the air.

Dragon and dragon-boy scream with absolute and pure ecstasy into the storm, back in the air at last.

They are _alive_ again.

The wing holds â€" it hurts but it holds â€" and they play together in the storm, letting it blow them inland and then diving from one gust to another until they find one that roars away up and back from the cliffs and lets them gain height. The wind blows them wildly and they let it, surrendering to the sky because it is infinitely better than the ground.

Hiccup yelps their _ready-me-launch_ noise and they fly in parallel for a while, dragon chasing lighter dragon-boy and twining around him in midair. The sky is theirs to dance in together, and it is with relief that they rejoice in it. They are not trapped and they will not be trapped forever, so they will be free again from this island that stalks them with nightmares.

Up up up and they ride the winds, gaining altitude erratically but determinedly. It is too dark to see far with the night and the storm but they wish they could get high enough to see all the way home. One way lies safety, and their family, their flock, and one day soon they will set their tail to the _sickbadwrongthing_ and fly home. They cannot see it from here, but they can try, until the storm becomes sneaky and shoves them back down. That the island beneath them is the crux of it all is something they do not think about right now, too caught up in the exhilaration of flight regained.

By then Hiccup is back on his dragon-love's back and they are flying together as one again. The night and the sky are all theirs.

Finally the whims of the winds blow them all the way out to sea, and Toothless chooses to land on one of the sea stacks that surround this island for some distance, alighting with a crash that shakes their bones more because he cannot be bothered to slow down properly and be careful than because he cannot land any better. He wants to feel the landing and know that he has been in the air to land from.

On his shoulders, Hiccup screams a sound of pure joy as their brief flight ends. Toothless joins him and they roar together.

Toothless drops to his belly on the new island â€" a different ground beneath their feet, the relief of it! â€" and rests his jaw on the ground, breathing in the storm air and the smell of the sea and the scent of his Hiccup-_beloved_ as the dragon-boy unfastens the binding straps easily with clever paws and slips down to join him on the ground, rubbing his cheek along the bigger dragon's and purring so hard he is shaking with it.

The dragon-boy whimpers with the strength of the relief that washes through him. The wing has borne the stress of the flight, although they are not yet ready to go very far. Soon they will be free again, and strong enough to fly home.

His nightmares have been Vikings and old and horrible memories resurrected and the sound of wing bones snapping and the feeling of falling from the sky, but they have also been of traps and of never flying again, being imprisoned in a single piece of ground and never returning to the sky where he belongs, where they belong together, that he and Toothless who are a single person will be exiled to the ground.

Now they have hope. With it and each other they can hold back everything else that dares to challenge them.

He sings all this to Toothless, who croons and nuzzles him, licking a swipe up his face and through his fur that washes away instantly in the rain. The bigger dragon's ribs heave with great gasps for breath from flying and sheer excitement.

Then Toothless sits up with his dragon-boy-half beside him and roars out into the storm, a single wordless and complex and fearless sound full of meaning: it challenges everything that is out there, _pfikingr_ and _sickbadwrongthing_ alike.

They do not scare the ones who are _Tt-(click)-th-phuh-ss_ together, who are together and fierce and beautiful and unafraid, and if the things that threaten come for the two-who-are-one then it is those things who should fear.

When they are together the skies are theirs and they are as bold and as brave as the king of dragons himself.

Now they have hope and they will be brave enough to fight rather than hide from now on. Soon they will be free and unafraid.

Toothless roars his declaration of war to the storm and the skies and all the seas, fueled by the love of the dragon-boy who has absolute faith in him.

Then the nightmares will belong to those who send them as the pair screams defiance and a threat of their own to the skies and all that is in them.

They will be free and fearless again.

Later, once the storm abates a little, they make their way back to their cave-nest, swimming most of the way because Toothless' wing is aching from the exertion, arriving back just before the sun comes up behind fog and clouds and climbing tiredly to the nest, dragon-boy draped sleepily over his companion's shoulders. He wakes up enough to get down before the black dragon shakes himself roughly, shedding seawater and rainwater and splattering it around the cave, unintentionally washing off some of the chalk drawings that litter the rock walls. Hiccup is undisturbed by this "it happens all the time at home, and he is too tired to protest, stretching and yawning and curling up in their nest with a paw over his eyes.

He is asleep almost before Toothless steps over him delicately and joins him, although he shifts in his sleep to get closer to the rumbling purr that is as much a part of him as his own heartbeat and the heart-fire warmth that is as essential to him as breath.

* * *

><p>The next day Hiccup sprawls out on a sunny rock and sleeps through most of it, relaxed and pleased and comfortable on his back with his paws over his head and the sun on his face and his throat and chest full of purring, until Uh strrrrTT shows up. He has come to expect and somewhat accept her presence, and through practice has even learned to say her name a little more closely to the tangled sounds she makes for it.

Still, when she arrives he shifts on the rock, rolling over so as not to expose vulnerable stomach and throat to her. She has not tried to attack him yet, but she is a _pfikingr_, a dragon-killer, and he does not trust her. But she has fed him and, more recently, Toothless as well, bringing fish from further away than those that swim past the edges of this island, and she draws some, and she tries to talk to him even though she does it very badly, and she chases away loud and armed _pfikingr_ who are either enemies or strange-dangerous, and she is not _St-t-t-t-t-kk__._

She brought the _St-t-t-t-t-kk_ here, but he is an Alpha and she belongs to him so she must obey. Hiccup has removed any responsibility for that from her. She did not shout at him and ask him angry questions that hurt _so so so_ badly.

So she can stay.

He watches her through half-closed eyes, head resting on folded paws, as she looks around for him. She is happy to see him when she does see him. She is worried about something. She is tired. It is beyond him how she can be talking so loud and still insist on shouting sounds at him. Doesn't she know how much she says all the time anyway?

He complains _pfikingr stupid_ to Toothless, who is too far away to hear him. The black dragon has waded out into the sea water and has spread out his sore wing into it to go cold and numb after last night's flight.

Hiccup has accepted her presence, but he is not particularly attached to her. She is better than the alternative, and not as bad as she could be, but he would leave her behind without a second glance, and fully intends to, as soon as possible. When they leave he will miss the silly small-cousins who like to talk to him and play with each other all around him and are fun to watch much more than he will ever again think about a human.

He has hated and been afraid of humans too deeply and for too long for him to see her as anyone he might empathize with. He will tolerate her, and play her strange games with her when he is bored, but he does not sympathize with her the way he does not know she sympathizes with him. They are too irreconcilably different.

She calls his name " still wrong, maybe she can pronounce his name no better than he can pronounce hers " and waves a greeting wave. She does not try to signal _come here you_ to him because he refuses to go anywhere near her when she does, and whenever she tries he ignores her until she goes away. He doesn't come when called by _pfikingr_. His nest-mates, yes. The king of dragons, yes. Toothless, always.

Uh strrrTT, no.

She has, eventually, learned this.

He watches as she looks up and around watching for small-cousins, who do not like her. She must overlook the one sleeping on a tree branch behind her, because she does not grimace and move away, but instead puts the food she has brought on the beach wrapped in rough folding

kkkn-ffsss which is many many small strings all together and sits down on her rock waiting for him.

Hiccup does not want to play the game of sounds today. He wants to go back to sleep and dream of flying and being at home in the nest with his kin. They have been away so long now. Cloudjumper will be worried and angry and will scold them, and there will be eggs he has not talked to, and there will be ships traveling through that he does not know about. There will be games better than the game of sounds to play and good hunting to do and more drawings to make. He misses their own home-nest that is just right for both halves of him together where they are comfortable and warm in the safe smells and sounds of the nest. When they are in their own nest with their family there will not be nightmares.

Homesick, Hiccup thrums, placing his jaw against the rock and humming into it to make a different noise, _lonely flying no returning lonely empty_.

Lonely is not the best way to translate the half-hummed, half-cried noise "Hiccup is never lonely, he is never alone" but it is the sound of a dragon without a flock. He is with Toothless, and this much at least is right with his world, but they are alone together, and for a little while longer until it no longer hurts them to fly he can only dream.

But he is not so comfortable around _Uh strrrrTT_ that he can sleep while she is there, and he knows from experience that she will go away faster if she has talked at him.

So he stretches, squirms against the rock briefly to _itch itch itch_ away sand, and leaps down to the shore. Before he goes anywhere, he calls out to Toothless-_heart-of-mine_, joyfully celebrating _flying flying we flying us flying good happy happy happy us!_

Toothless raises his head and calls back _good yes us good happy flying_. The seagull he is stalking flies away at the noise, but maybe there will be other seagulls stupid enough to land on the water near a dragon. Seagulls are stupid, and there are many of them, so many of them are very stupid and can be eaten, he reasons subconsciously.

That is good, and Toothless is well, and there are no other threats in sight, so he advances on the food with slightly less caution than before. It has not been a trap before, and it has not made him sick before, but it may do so. Hiccup watches _Uh strrrrTT_ as he approaches the food. She does not look excited or tense or hunting in the ways he has learned that she does, and she talks so loudly when she does not know she is doing it that she would if the food was a trap.

So it is safe for him to eat it, and he does, taking the _kkkn-ffsss_ as well because it is made of strings and he likes to play with strings. He rubs the feeling of it across his paws and picks it apart for them as he eats, tying knots he doesn't remember learning how to tie.

As he does, he keeps a wary eye on _Uh strrrrTT_, who has gotten to her feet and has come a little closer to him. He watches her suspiciously, but makes no attempt to move just yet.

She continues to approach, stopping and sitting down with her legs awkwardly folded every few slow steps, and he lets her, because she has no sharp thing and he knows that he is a dragon stronger and faster than she is and his claws are sharp. For many days now she has been doing this, and always she has stopped and moved away before she is in range for him to attack her.

Today she does not. She reaches out a paw towards him and asks a question he does not completely understand, but he can guess: she is asking a question, she is trying to touch him, she has not done so yet and her paw is still where it is. He guesses that she wants to know if she can touch him.

Hiccup has warned her before when she tried to touch Toothless. She is the enemy, a killer of dragons, and touching them is not good. She is not one of his flock, she is not even one of his own kind: she may not get that close. Before when he threatened to kill her if she tried it again he had meant it. But last night there was flying and he is very, very happy today.

So rather than killing her, magnanimous after knowing they will return to the sky soon, he only bares his teeth and growls at her, staring at the offensive paw, until she puts it down and backs away, going scared-pale and moving in a worried way.

Hiccup decides he is not so hungry for pfikingr food after all, and puts down the remains and backs away as well, watching her all the time as he crouches down and flattens some of the muddy sand to make a place to draw.

She makes sad noises and moves as if she was apologizing to him. Then she gets slightly upset but not enough to shout at him. He suspects she is scolding him, but he cannot imagine for what " or what gives her any authority to scold him. Cloudjumper may do so, which is common and sort of good because Cloudjumper tries to protect them, but it usually has only slightly more effect than her scolding does. Dragon-kin who are guarding eggs may do so because eggs must be protected. The king may do so, which is like being crushed to the ground whimpering in fear and shame and being kept there by the king's great claws.

Being scolded by a pfikingr she is like being scolded by seagulls, and makes about as much sense. There are lots of 'no' sounds in there, but he does not know whether she does not want him to do something or if she is not going to do something or both.

Eventually she realizes he is ignoring her, and she gives up and comes to draw in the sand with him, although this time she keeps her distance. They have played this game before over the many days since the St-t-t-t-t-kk hurt him with bad questions and made him remember a very old and strong reason why he hates and fears pfikingr so much.

Hiccup is drawing his joy at flying last night in the storm and he scuffs out his thoughts before she can see them. He instinctively tries to keep secrets from her, because her movements sometimes say very loudly that she is hunting him and he does not like to be hunted. She has never seen the two-who-are-one fly, either together or gliding separately; when he talks to Toothless he does not tell

her what they are saying on the rare occasions when he knows how to say it in a way that she would understand. He will not tell her that Toothless' wing is healing and they will leave soon.

He will not leave tracks for her to follow and she will miss her pounce when they fly away soon now. Hiccup does not think to question why she is hunting him because he knows deep in the heart of himself: she is a Viking, he is a dragon, _pfikingr_ hurt and hunt and trap and kill dragons. She is stalking very slowly but she talks too loudly and he can see her hunting. When she springs they will not be there to catch.

Today she has brought him a piece of paper, which he looks at with interest although he cannot see what is on it " the mere fact of it being paper is still enough to get his attention even though he has seen more paper on this island than in his whole life before. She holds it out to him as if offering, but he will not take it from her directly, that would mean getting too close for comfort.

He waits until she remembers this, and she leans forward, puts it down, and backs away. Only then does he retrieve it and bring it back to his place on the ground to look at.

It is another picture of Cloudjumper, but not as good even as the one before that he had made better. Still, he hums with pleasure and happily says the dragon's name as _(click)-shhh-prrr._

Uh strrrTT tries to say the name and cannot even begin. She grimaces in frustration.

"Herrr?" Hiccup asks her hopefully. Why do they have so many pictures of Cloudjumper if he is not here?

She shakes her head in the way that means no.

The dragon-boy is sad, hopes dashed again. He croons _regret lonely no family flock Cloudjumper here_.

Next she points at the paper and asks a word that he cannot pronounce properly but he knows that some things are "bad" and those are things they do not like and some things are the other noise and those are things they do, although they do not always agree on which various things are.

"Issss," he says instead, agreeing and purring in case she does not understand. Cloudjumper is very good. He tries to explain, drawing on old memories that he did not know he had until they had been used to hurt him. _Cloudjumper_, he says the proper way that he says it, and then digs through the scraps of _pfikingr_ words he knows to come up with, "mama hrrt."

This is a word he learned many days ago. They had been talking about Toothless, and she had used a word in between their names that he did not know and was full of sounds he could not pronounce. She had then looked sad and amazed and confused all at once. It had clearly been an important word.

Hiccup had whistled his questioning noise and she had said it again, then thought, and come up with a different sound. "Hrrt?" he had asked, not understanding but at least somewhat able to say it.

She had put her paw on her chest and repeated the sound, flapping the paw up and down in the sound of " a heartbeat, he had figured out, and he had chirped with amusement at understanding.

"Hrrt," he'd repeated, satisfied with his translation of what she had said. "Tt-th-ss (click)-phuh _hrrt_. (click)-phuh Tt-th-ss _hrrt_. Issss."

Now she looks sad and amazed and confused again. She points to the picture of Cloudjumper, then puts her paws over her heart with the word he cannot pronounce " it has an _uffff_ noise in it " and asks, "mama " Aka?"

He nods yes, and draws in the sand Cloudjumper with wings spread over himself and Toothless together, very small, to show her that because Cloudjumper had been their mother's mate he had protected them.

Uh strrrrTT clenches her paws and says a new word.

Hiccup tries to repeat it, because that is how the game of sounds is played. "uh thrrrr." He thinks he can hear an _ffff_ noise in it as well, but he cannot get his mouth to do that at the same time as all the other sounds.

"Mama hrrt?" she tests.

The dragon-boy shows he has learned the new word by pointing at the picture of Cloudjumper and saying "uh thrrrr."

But she is not happy. She goes very quiet and sad and a little scared, and then she mutters something that contains the sound _St-t-t-t-t-kk_. _The dragon-boy hisses angrily at the familiar and unwelcome noise, and she ducks her shoulders and apologizes in her posture and voice.

Hiccup growls at her; this game is over. He looks away from her pointedly and goes back to drawing. After a while, she picks up a stick to do the same.

Before she can draw anything, though, the small-cousin asleep in the tree wakes up and sees Hiccup. Pleased, she darts over to him and hovers around his head telling him happily about all the fish that had been caught in the storm that her flock had fished out, that _storm good fish storm us hungry fish hungry fish storm good!_

The dragon-boy lifts his head and chirps back to her happily, but he can see that _Uh strrrrTT_ is a little afraid and mostly angry.

He makes a questioning noise at her. She's only a single small-cousin, why is she afraid and angry?

She shrugs her shoulders, a gesture he recognizes, and says a question back to him.

Hiccup searches through his few scraps of words she understands and comes up with "Drakkkn nuh bad. _Uh strrrrTT_ nuh " but he doesn't know what she would call it and flinches while growling, like she's doing even if she doesn't know she's doing it because she can't talk properly even though she sort of tries when she knows she is talking

to him, but only sometimes.

The small-cousin on his shoulders squawks in outrage to hear the noises from him, wailing in her confusion that _bad noise bad noise strange-far-dragon-cousin bad noise_.

He purrs at her, and she calms down, her mutterings to herself about _strange-far-dragon-cousin confused confused bad strange _becoming_ fine fine fine_ as he pets her.

The _pfikingr_ she grimaces unhappily, trying to talk.

As she does so, Toothless returns to the shore, shaking himself dry and padding over to Hiccup to lean against his back as if trying to knock him over. Paying attention to _Uh strrrrTT_ is temporarily set aside so Hiccup can greet his dragon-half-_beloved_'s return with croons of love and joy. The small-cousin takes off from his shoulder, protesting her displacement with angry _you big you big me fight me fight angry angry_ shrieks.

The big black dragon lets her buzz around him for a while before knocking her out of the sky with his tail. _Mine!_ he snarls at the little dragon picking herself up out of the algae-coated muck at the base of a rock. She puffs herself up and fearlessly threatens to blast him with her small fires.

They growl at each other. Hiccup laughs a dragon-laugh and vaults to his love's back, sprawling across the flying-with and pressing his cheek to the back of Toothless' neck. The scales are warm under his touch and he hums a soft sound â€" of course _mine_, he and Toothless are a single being.

From there, he looks back over at _Uh strrrrTT_, who has been drawing while she thinks â€" which he understands completely and takes for granted, so ignores â€" and now has figured out what she is going to say. It is very important to her, he can see.

He looks at her curiously.

Encouraged by his attention, she says something slowly, and then stops to let him sort it out.

Something about dragons. Something about food, or maybe eating. Angry. Scared. Mostly angry. Dragons eating Viking food, and she doesn't like it.

He shrugs; dragons must hunt. She knows this. She brings him food. He cannot say this aloud, but he gestures it to her because she understands that better sometimes, pointing to her and saying her name, to himself and saying his, beckoning the way she asks him to give her things, and pretending to eat and saying "ffssh".

She raises a paw and points it at him, and he instinctively draws back just a little. Toothless growls, reassuring him with his protectiveness, and she lowers the paw.

Finally she gets to two sounds he does recognize, those for dragons and one he associates with her leaving but he can't quite pronounce. He hears it as: "Drakkkn kko." From those and other sounds like those for _no_ and _bad_, he figures out that she wants dragons not

to be here, but it is also as if she expects him to do something " she is looking at him like she is waiting and anxious like the game of sounds where she says something and waits for him to repeat it or guess what she means.

Hiccup looks around, confused. There are many dragons on this shore, himself and Toothless and the sulking small-cousin, who is pretending that she never picked a fight with a much bigger Toothless. They were here first, and then she came. Why doesn't she go away? And if they are hungry, then they must hunt.

He shrugs again and says, "Drakkkn herrr," which he can do, and tries to say that dragons get hungry, but although he knows the word he has trouble saying it. He does not see why this is his problem.

This makes her angry. She does not say it with her noises, but she says it very loudly with her body. Her paws are clenched and her jaw is set, and she wants to growl but doesn't.

Hiccup stares back at her from his dragon-love's back, unthreatened and unimpressed. He and Toothless will go away when they can, and no amount of snarling will make them go any faster than they already want to.

Toothless is less tolerant, growling back, and she gets up, frustration and annoyance and giving-up in her walk, and goes away angry.

Sometime later, he thinks to look at what she had drawn in the sand while she thought about how to talk and while Toothless and the small-cousin had argued. He figures out that it is a picture of dragons and Vikings fighting, and growls at it, scuffing it out with his claws angrily.

Otherwise her visit does not bother him, and her departure even less so. She is a hunter and a killer of dragons, not a person the way he and his family are. She's pfikingr. She's human.

* * *

><p>Except that night Toothless has nightmares, worse than ever before. He growls and snarls as he shudders in his sleep, inadvertently waking the dragon-boy pressed against his side. Hiccup rolls to all his paws, awakening in distress and fear to reflect his Toothless-beloved although he has not been dreaming the same dream.

"Tt-th-ss!" he cries aloud, anxious. "Tt-th-ss!" He whines and mewls and scratches his soft-claws down the black dragon's side to wake him from whatever horrors are chasing his love where Hiccup cannot follow him to protect him.

To his shock and horror the bigger dragon pulls away from him, lurching awkwardly to his paws and stumbling towards the mouth of the cave with his head down so that his nose almost brushes the ground. His eyes do not open and his steps are wrong and strange and for the first time Hiccup can smell the sickbadwrong stink that Toothless had complained of before, terrifying him as the reek of it chokes him. It smells of death and hunger and fear, of madness and emptiness and power, of rotted meat and the deepest and darkest sea caves where

no dragon goes.

Hiccup snarls a fierce and dangerous sound worthy of any dragon faced with an enemy, and acts on instinct. If the _sickbadwrong_ is in his Toothless-half then the Hiccup-half will defend them both.

He leaps at his dragon-love, digging soft-claws into the vulnerable spot under Toothless' jaw and snarling. Toothless is so much bigger than him and stronger too, but Hiccup will not let the _sickbadwrongthing_ take his love from him.

They go together, or they do not go at all.

Toothless stumbles on, indifferent to the strike that should have interrupted his breath and made him cough to get it back. He has not even noticed, as if he is already dead. Dragons do not normally sleepwalk, living as they do so often on cliffs and over oceans, and Hiccup is terrified by this unexpected and unnatural occurrence. The dragon-boy crouches between the sleepwalking black dragon and the cave mouth, wailing a keening sound of horror and distress and grief and loneliness, of absolute despair and unconditional love.

When Toothless makes no direct attempt to get him out of the way, simply walking forward in that unnatural pace, Hiccup wraps his paws around his dragon-love's head and screams a cry of loss and love that echoes through the cave. Toothless could bite him in half like this, or burn him to ashes, but he doesn't care. He _doesn't care_.

And Toothless stops, and the wings that were spread to launch him into the air and fly him away from half himself drop, and his eyes wake up and open as his ear-flaps twitch towards the agonized sound.

Hiccup senses the change the moment it happens, the instant the _sickbadwrongthing_ leaves his beloved other half, and his wail of pain turns to one of joy and relief as he trembles. He slumps to the ground as all the tension and fear goes out of him with the source, and then he bounces instantly back up to press against Toothless where he sits puzzled and afraid.

Wordlessly, the dragon wraps a paw around him and holds them together. Hiccup whines deep in his throat against black scales, desperately worried and demanding to know what has just happened.

Calling, Toothless says, in between licks at his dragon-boy's fur and face whenever he can reach them. He purrs reassuringly before it turns into a growl. _Hungry calling hungry hungry frightened._ The black dragon cowers slightly, hunching his shoulders and pinning his ear-flaps back to his head. It's a submissive pose, the look of a dragon being given an order he can't refuse.

Wrong bad wrong bad hate bad scared you mine mine mine mine mine! Hiccup shrieks into Toothless' scales.

Toothless purrs a counterpoint to calm him, agreeing absolutely, and then pulls back. When his dragon-boy looks at him in shock, he purrs again and then drops one shoulder, indicating _get on_.

Together, they leave the cave and look around them.

The black dragon's sensitive ears catch something that those of the dragon-boy cannot. He looks up, ear-flaps perking up and head turning back and forth to track the progress of many dragons flying overhead and past them, in towards the island and away. _Angry fighting pfikingr dragons many fighting angry fighting hungry many scared hungry_, he relays, listening.

Hiccup doesn't see what any of this has to do with them or the wrongness that had tried to take his heart from him. Dragons raid Vikings, and Vikings don't like it, but no one cares what _pfikingr_ like. _Raid dragons raid fine yes why scared bad bad threat?_

Toothless shrugs, still listening. They stay there for a while longer, Hiccup nervously tangling his paws in the flying-with in case something is going to try to take Toothless away again.

Eventually, as the night wears on, their patience is partially rewarded.

Dragons stream by loud and low-flying overhead, weighed down by carrying red meat prey and with claws and jaws full of fish from far away like the _pfikingr_ she has been bringing them from the human nest, all calling together. Some of their wingbeats sound wrong, as if they are tired or hurt. There are many of them, maybe a whole nest, and they are all shrieking. They do not sound like a flock going home from a successful raid.

They sound like they are going somewhere terrifying, but they cannot stop themselves. And they are going the way that Toothless thinks the bad thing he can sense can be found. Why would they do that? the black dragon wonders, fretting in low and worried croons and soft wails. Can they not feel it? But they are afraid! Why are they going towards the bad thing? It does not make sense.

Frightened all over again, he dashes back into the cave. When Hiccup slides from his shoulders he wraps his paws around the dragon-boy and curls up, hiding his other half in all of him, paws and wings and tail and head, in case the _sickbadwrongthing_ tries to take his love from him.

Fear, Toothless dragon-whispers. _Bad bad badâ€¦!_

Hiccup reaches out from the tangle of black dragon to place a reassuring paw on his nose. He settles himself comfortably in the other dragon's embrace and purrs comfort and love. _Guard_, he says, _we flying us home flying us together_.

They must leave and they must leave soon.

* * *

><p>To be continued.

12. Chapter 12

****Author's Note:**** Probably T-rated levels of violence in this chapter. For the moment, general story rating stays where it is.

ON WITH THE SHOW!

**Nightfall****, Part Twelve**

Astrid never wants dragons to attack her village â€" she wants them all to fly off the edge of the world and never come back â€" but if they have to do so, they couldn't have chosen a better night.

Better for her. Worse for them. After that afternoon, Astrid is spitting with rage and eager for something to take it out on.

How dare he? She had asked him for help â€" Astrid never asks for help â€" and he'd looked through her indifferently with those cold green not-quite-human eyes barely any different from those so disconcertingly on the real dragon. She'd lowered herself to beg from a creature more dragon than human, all for the people she meant to devote her life to, and he'd looked away from her uncaring, dismissing the struggles and the suffering of her people as something he accepted, because he cared more about the dragons that were trying to starve them out if they didn't kill them or burn them to ashes first!

She slams her axe into the face of a Nightmare, but the eyes she aims for aren't bulbous and golden and glowing in the dark. In the place of every pair of dragon eyes she sees flint-hard green ones that should have been human but aren't. Those eyes surround her; they have followed her all the way here and they are haunting her. They had been the eyes of a dragon in a human face, and she'd seen not a person but something with a dragon's heart, and surely that was the same as saying no heart at all? Wasn't it? Except â€"

She is beginning to wonder if there is anyone even in there, anything human left in him at all. Every time she sees flashes â€" when he understood the idea of love even when he couldn't pronounce it, when he drew because he was happy, when he cared for Toothless as much as Toothless, however impossibly, cared for him, when he actually looked straight at her because he was trying to communicate â€" she thinks there might be.

And then every time he does something so completely inhuman â€" usually he has only to open his mouth, how can he make those noises and still leave her stumbling to translate when he tries to speak Norse one broken word at a time? â€" she remembers or she realizes all over again that he hates and fears her because she's human and he doesn't know he is.

The irony is driving her mad. If she could just get through to him! If she could draw him the way he can draw her and show him to himself!

Or maybe he does know and just won't admit it. Or possibly he just doesn't care, which would make him, in her eyes, a monster all over again. She doesn't know which one to believe or which one would be worse.

Astrid hates that she'd been starting to see a person in there. She loathes that she has been getting attached to him. She vows to never do it again. He's no child. And he's certainly no tame pet.

Cold-blooded heartless stupid pitiless creature! Astrid curses as she fights; she defends herself, defends her people, and holds them off for just one more strike. And she honestly can't say whether she's talking about the fire-breathers trying to eat her people off their own island or the dragon-boy on the shore, who is probably fast asleep cuddled up in perfect contentment with that nightmarishly clever Night Fury while she's out here in the cold and the dark, except for all the fire, which is worse, fighting his friends while they try to kill her either quickly and directly in battle or slowly through starvation.

Every blow she strikes is one more moment she doesn't need him. Every scream of pain from the fire-breathing monsters breaking into their stores and going after everything the ragtag fishing fleet has brought back over the last couple of weeks and the remnants of their much-harried herds is a victory. Somewhere down in the village, she can hear cursing and shouting and then a sound like a twang and a thunk as Gobber's catapult, which she suspects is less fixed than he'd like to think, hurls spike-infested rocks into the sky in an entirely uncontrolled manner. It's causing quite a lot of havoc up in the air, though, so she smiles grimly, barely more than a snarl though gritted teeth â€œ

Which reminds her all over again of Hiccup, who hisses and threatens to bite her if she gets too close as if she's going to sprout claws and tear into his throat â€œ although he is certainly capable of doing that, she knows too well: those scratches beneath her breastbone might actually scar where he'd threatened to rip her heart out. Surely by now even he must know that she's not trying to hurt him. He isn't stupid, he figures everything else out faster than anyone in the village she can think of. Except humans. Except, as she knows but he doesn't seem to, himself.

She wants to grab him and shake him, which even she admits, if only to herself, would probably not help. But if she could she'd drag him away from that Night Fury, another incredibly bad idea, and bring him here by the scruff of his neck to show him the people fighting for their lives and their homes and their families, rustled out of bed very late at night with hard work to do tomorrow after work just as hard yesterday just to survive.

And he'd probably turn on them to protect the attacking dragons, which are coming more often, she realizes. She should have had more time to get through to him and get him on their side but it hasn't even been a month since the last direct raid â€œ oh, people have seen dragons in the woods and up in the mountains, but only a few at a time and if they'd just stay away from the village they could all do whatever they wanted â€œ except come after her people!_

Astrid rolls and spins in an absolutely perfect somersault roll and comes up again under a Nadder's nose, chopping up at it and feeling the blade hit home in flesh and bone. It screams and tries to get away from the Viking shieldmaiden, slashing at her with the claws on its feet, but she twists away and the combination of movements only makes the injury worse. Astrid will be washing blood out of her braid for hours but she doesn't care right now. She wants to hurt something, and the damn creatures aren't screaming enough to satisfy her right now.

Every scream she hears from her own people only makes it worse, because in between the battle-mad shouting and the people who are fresh to the fight and still having fun in the excitement of combat she can hear sounds that are people in pain and people who are afraid.

And she has failed them.

She has held her tongue and kept her patience and tried so hard. She has faced her own fears and stared them down every time Toothless has looked over at her, which he does often as she tries to interact with his semi-human companion, stomping hard on her instinctive need to run as far away from him as fast as she can, to which she refuses to surrender. She has managed not to drive away the little monsters that swarm around him. She has tried to feed him and tried to teach him to talk and she'd almost sort of gotten fond of him and she realizes all over again that it may as well have been for nothing.

The absolute indifference in his eyes! She had seen her failure as clearly as the sun.

So for now she burns away her shame and her anger in the heat of battle and defends her people and herself and her honor with the axe in her hand and the courage in her heart.

The fight, she knows. This, she can do. She is clearly no dragon tamer, and she rarely dances at feasts, but this, this is her dance.

The ground beneath her feet is hers; she has bled on it and shed blood onto it. She knows every step of the place, every wall she can push off of and every ramp she doesn't dare leap on to because it will give beneath her feet but the two-headed monster chasing her doesn't know that and will plunge through bringing it down to a level she can reach it on. She knows the difference between a flicker of reflected firelight from armor on a man with a sword in one hand and a mace in the other, swinging both in a deadly whirlpool of iron and shouting as he charges, and the flare of a new fire that starts as a Gronkle vomits burning liquid rock to cut off the woman storming it as it smashes through a sealed crate after the salted fish newly packed in there.

Her ears take in and sort through the voices of her people as they fight. She picks out people who need help before they can admit they need it, because they never will, and people who have won their battles and can be sent to support the others. In the midst of the fight no one questions her when she grabs arms as thick around as her waist and shoves the owners to where they'll be more use, because they trust her. They rely on her to protect them.

Astrid organizes fire crews, breaks up a quarrel over a rapidly diminishing stock of crossbow bolts by sending half of the arguing cluster to help Gobber load his bloody catapult and sharing the remaining bolts out equally among the rest, and checks on the cave dug into the rock and barricaded with their strongest and most reinforced doors that the very small children have been moved into. She corrals some of the older ones who are trying to get out and get into the fight despite the fact that they are small enough to be stepped on by accident, considers confiscating a knife almost as big as the child holding it, and then thinks better of it and appoints

the knife's holder the guard on the gate in charge of all the other would-be fighters. The little girl puffs herself up importantly and holds her new post with excitement and enthusiasm " Astrid will have to keep an eye on her once she gets big enough to put to use for real.

She notes with some concern the spectacle of Stoick wielding that warhammer to devastating effect. His eyes in the firelight are cold and hard, his jaw set and that great voice silent; he is taking no joy in the fight.

He is not defending his people. He is killing dragons. There is a line, and he is venturing across it. The chief fights not to drive the fire-breathing creatures away but to get them down where they can be killed, pursuing and persisting even when his opponent is clearly beaten. There's a long gash scored into the crook of his left arm where something trying to get away from him has gotten lucky; he does not seem to have noticed and his wrist guards are a mass of caking blood worse than Astrid's hair right now. How much of it is his and how much is from the marauding dragons she cannot say.

It must last for hours before the dragons give up and go back to whatever forsaken place is their home, after it turns into a siege of sorts with dragons pacing around a makeshift barricade around Gobber's catapult, once they've learned better than to fly over it. Astrid wouldn't fly over that thing if she could fly, either, and she's not particularly comfortable sheltering near it because there's always the possibility that one of Gobber's contraptions will collapse under its own weight or explode outward having been pulled apart by a cord with too much tension on it, especially after dragons have been trying to blow it up. Still, as the night wears on, she and the other besieged Vikings manage to catch some naps in shifts. Hers are riddled with half-conscious nightmares all but indistinguishable from reality, and when she wakes up from the light doze she's slipped into in her turn she's momentarily not sure if she's done so or not.

Ultimately, the raiding dragons leave behind a lot of damage that will take weeks if not months to replace, severely raided caches of food that would have alleviated a lot of worries later in the year, plenty of bloodshed, a handful of trapped dragons either ensnared or too wounded to fly, more dead dragons, and three human corpses.

Astrid goes cold at the sight of the dead. None of the children that she had discouraged from getting out of the cave are among them, but she knows everyone in the village and every death, even of a warrior in combat who has lived a life knowing that he or she will most likely die in battle and accepted that, is a blow to her heart.

This, this is her fault, because she cannot make a single boy see the obvious.

She wants to take off running and grab him and shake him and bring him back to see the dead she'll place at his feet and the blood that she'll put on his hands, because he can talk to dragons, he could have stopped this, and he had looked straight through her when she begged for help.

But she can't. She has too many responsibilities to her own people to abandon them to put him and her anger before them when they need her.

Instead she helps to put out fires and straps rough bandages around wounds and counts heads. She dispatches her Vikings down to the cove to check on the ships "one day soon, if the attacks keep getting worse as they are doing, the dragons are going to get it into their heads to burn the ships. She is glad dragons are not that intelligent " if they couldn't send ships out to fish, trawling the deeper waters, Berk would starve permanently, and none of them would make it through the winter, and the dragons would have the whole island to themselves.

_Toothless would think of that , _something nasty in the corner of her mind whispers.

There is no point in her helping to prop up walls and deliberately collapse already-collapsing buildings when the island is full of people so much bigger than she is, so instead she goes to help the warriors who are wrangling dragons out of nooses and bola and into the fighting pit. She's spent plenty of time in that pit herself and owes her life a few times over to the things she'd learned there.

Still, when a Nightmare hit by one of Gobber's catapult payloads tries to prop itself up on shattered wings and fight back when they come for it, she flinches. Not because she's afraid of the thing, but because, to her irritation, she feels sorry for it. She's seen too many broken wings on dragons recently.

And it just won't stop fighting back even though it's clearly terrified of them and hurting even more every time it moves " when had she gotten so good at figuring out what dragons were feeling from those incomprehensible noises? And they can't do anything with it, they can't get a rope around it because Nightmares just set themselves on fire and burn through ropes, and they can't herd it into the pit because it can't move.

Finally Astrid has to leap in despite the fire and put her axe through its serpentine neck just to make it stop making that horrible whimpering sound that it's making. She can't stand it anymore.

Blood splatters her and the flames die out as it hits the ground and she rolls away. She comes up shaking, the sound it had been making still ringing in her ears. Astrid does not want to sympathize with dragons.

Not when her village has been smashed again and people " real human people " are dead.

Finally there comes a point where no one is watching her or wants anything from her, and there is nothing more she can do. Astrid has had a horrible night and a worse morning and she is out of patience.

As she slips away to take it out on someone who she considers wholeheartedly deserves it she furiously throws her favorite axe into a tree trunk, where it sticks " of course it does, that's what she'd meant it to do, Astrid can throw an axe. When she tries to pull

it out she is horrified to find that the haft is coming loose and the blade has begun to wobble. She has been so caught up in trying to tame a wild boy that she hasn't even been looking after her favorite weapon, the one she relies on in battle to protect Berk. It is clearly time for her to get her priorities " and her methods " straight.

Angry, Astrid marches away towards the shore.

* * *

><p>Always before she has been careful when she approaches him. She has stepped lightly and shed her weapons if not her armor " he's sort of fascinated by the fact that she's wearing metal even though he won't get close enough to look at it properly, but she's seen him watching the light reflect off her pauldrons and buckles " and made sure that he knows she's there before she intrudes too far into his and Toothless' space. She has spoken softly and been patient and brought bribes of complex toys for him to take apart and reassemble and fed food they can't spare to him and his beloved Toothless both. She's spoken baby talk and waved her hands around until she has felt very stupid, all in hopes of communicating with him.<p>

And apart from a few misunderstandings they have more or less gotten along. Whenever she has said or done something he doesn't like he is more likely to move away from her and retreat to some other area, glaring at her balefully the whole time, than try to argue with her. She wonders what her visits have been to him. Certainly they matter less to him than they do to her. He always gets tired of her presence long before she is through with him, and he is perfectly capable of just going away, and she's always let him, reasoning that chasing him would only make things worse.

Well, no more of that. Fuming and wound-up and overtired and grieving and ashamed at her own perceived failure, Astrid is going to damn well get in his face and make him understand just how bad the situation is here if she has to knock him over and sit on him to make him listen.

She'll figure out the _claws_ and the _actually bigger than she is_ and the _killer dragon shadowing him_ when she gets to them. Although she does leave the axe out of sight.

"Hiccup!" she yells as she storms onto the shoreline. There are more clouds in the distance following the other night's storm and the sea is dark and threatening. Yelling at him feels strangely but absolutely right, so she does it again. "Hiccup!" Clearly she should have done this weeks ago.

He is not hiding today, or sunning himself like a dragon, or fishing or scavenging, or drawing, or playing with Toothless or the Terrors, or any of the dozen other things she has watched him do over the past few weeks.

Today he is climbing around on the rocks that tumble down to the water's edge, but not for fun. It is almost as if he is pacing, dragon-claw gauntlets digging into the rock and shearing off small bits eroded away by the salt water, clambering from stone to stone with his head down and shoulders hunched up around his ears in that way that always makes it look like he's actually got invisible wings

that he is protecting his head with. Usually, this means she is annoying him and is a precursor to him ignoring her. His movements are anxious, and his eyes when he whips his head around to look at her are bloodshot, tired, and angry.

She can hear him growling and muttering to himself, the way dragons would do it if they grouched like grandfathers, even as she shouts.

Clearly he didn't get the good night's sleep she had imagined him indulging in while she fought for her life. Good. He's also clearly in a very bad mood " she doesn't have to be an expert in his dragonish movements to see that. Whether he knows it or not, anger and sullenness and maybe even a little bit of what she thinks might be fear " the way he moves looks like he expects to be ambushed, with lots of looking at his surroundings and especially up at the sky " come through quite clearly on his human face.

Astrid doesn't see Toothless, but with how fast that dragon can move that almost doesn't matter " he could kill her for this whether she can see him or not.

"You!" she challenges, marching over to his current rock. He's perched a little higher than her head, and he crouches back on his heels as she approaches, bracing himself as if to leap either at her or away and baring his teeth in that open-mouthed silent snarl she's become so familiar with, that wrinkles a snub nose even further and looks like it should have fangs but doesn't.

"You listen to me. This is _important._"

Sure enough, he whips away and vanishes over the top of the rock. Astrid is just winding up for a really good shout when he reappears on top of it with his hands bare of those gauntlets and, for some reason, dripping with salt water.

She's less worried about water than those claws, so now that they're back on his belt she starts to lay into him properly.

"Your dragon friends are trying to kill us. You get that? Dragons make Vikings dead. And that's _bad_. Bad, bad, bad, and I need _you_ to " "

That's as far as she gets before he pounces at her, knocking her flat to the grit and the rocks and the dirt and crushing out of her all the breath she had saved up for shouting at him. Because she's never seen him stand up properly, she keeps forgetting how tall he actually is " not a patch on his father, the real one, not the _dragon_ he seems to think is his father, or half the men in the village come to think of it, but strong.

But Astrid has been fighting for her life all morning and most of the night before that, and she remembers how he fights " she never forgets the way an enemy moves, ever. So rather than wasting time being surprised like last time she yells directly at him the moment she gets her breath back. He jerks his head back away from the sound like any animal and she uses the opportunity to get in one good punch to his jaw that drives him backwards just a little further. It's almost enough to put her knee into his gut to knock his breath out of him in perfectly fair turnabout but he blocks the attempt. Astrid had

half expected him to do that, though, and she braces herself against the ground and manages to flip them so that she's briefly the one pinning him.

It doesn't last; he gets a hand onto the collar of her tunic and another wrapped around her belt and throws her off, practically over his head. It's not at all like fighting a human man, who probably would have had a lot more hands on her and would react to her as a female fighter in a different way. Hiccup doesn't notice; it has occurred to her in the past that he might not even know that she's female, or particularly care. It's exactly like fighting a dragon.

In any case, he's already up and after her even as she's trying to twist in midair so the landing hurts a little less, and the spray of muddy, sticky sand she kicks up when she lands doesn't help even though there are far worse places she could have landed on this shore â€" it's full of very hard rocks.

Both his hands slam into her stomach as he pounces â€" he really does leap like a dragon and as long as she's on the ground she is in trouble but she is also lucky he does not have those claws on, and when she gets a chance she will wonder about why he doesn't when he's so obviously trying to hurt her â€" but she aims another punch at his face anyway. Hiccup snaps his head back too quickly for her to make contact this time: he's learning from her. Now she's worried.

But his next move is to get a hand into her braid and pull on it hard, digging his fingers into and through it, twisting her head to the side and baring her throat even as she's pulled towards those snarling teeth. There's suddenly a very real possibility that he really does intend to tear her throat out, without the claws.

She shrieks with rage almost like a dragon herself â€" no one does that to her, the last person who had pulled her hair had promptly gotten two of their teeth knocked out and they had both been seven years old at the time. He's unimpressed by her scream and roars directly into her face, but he also lets go of her braid and vaults away from her before she can retaliate.

Hiccup doesn't go far. He stays within a single leap of her as she sits up, holding back a desire to flinch even just a little at the impending bruise developing on her stomach, which she can already tell will be colorful and ugly, and glares at the dragon-boy glaring back at her from his hostile crouch.

"What in the â€" "

name of all the gods was that about? she doesn't get to say.

He slaps her.

It's a single sharp open-palmed blow across her cheek and jaw and mouth from what she has noticed is his dominant left hand and it stings more than the bruise for the sheer humanity and the shock of it.

Astrid is, temporarily, at a loss for words as he gets up and retreats â€" no. That would imply that he had lost. There's nothing of defeat about the way he returns to his pacing across the sea

rocks, moving up and down as easily as back and forth and scowling, shaking his head erratically as if trying to get water out of his ears or physically shake a thought out of his head. The way he's climbing around makes it almost look natural " Astrid herself would have to use her hands as much as her feet to move across those rocks. The only reason he's not physically bristling is that his borrowed scales don't do that. If he had a tail it would be lashing back and forth like a whip. She can almost see it.

Swearing under her breath at him, Astrid licks at her lip to see if it has broken open under the blow and tastes blood.

But it tastes wrong, and she spits it out in disgust.

Suddenly she notices the dampness on top of the burning sting of the slap and she touches her fingers to the aggrieved cheek, wondering.

They come away stained with dragon blood. It must be plastered across her face like a stripe. That was why he'd gotten his hands wet and not worn his gloves " he'd gotten the dried blood out of her hair that she'd totally forgotten was even there and painted it across her face like a banner.

Look what you've done, she imagines that Hiccup is saying. _Look at the blood of my friends on you. This is why we are enemies._

She is furious that this is exactly what she wants to say to him, and that he has found such an infuriating way to say it first.

Her shoulders hurt not from the brief fight but more from the tension between them, a promised phantom pain, of knowing that _any moment now_ Toothless is going to show up and weigh in on behalf of his dragon-boy, and she will be very, very dead. She can't imagine why he hasn't rushed to Hiccup's defense already"except that he hasn't needed much defending that he can't do himself up until now.

And he is really not going far from those rocks, despite his clear agitation. Maybe Toothless is behind or beneath them somewhere. She's been so cautious and tentative ever since they took up residence here that she's stayed mostly in a small range and so has never been over in that area of the shoreline. Anything could be back there.

Despite this, she stands up and unsuccessfully tries to wipe the blood from her face and tries again, approaching the fall of rocks where he paces. He shoots anxious and annoyed looks at her as she does so, but does not attack or bolt, although he looks as if he'd like to do both, maybe at the same time if he could manage it.

"I don't want to kill dragons," she says through gritted teeth, and then remembers that he hears her voice even if he doesn't always understand her words and tries saying it again more gently. It only sort of works, but she cannot get more of a handle on her temper than she has already done by not picking up the biggest rock she can manage from the flotsam on the beach and just throwing it at him. "I don't want to kill dragons. Killing dragons is bad."

"Isss," he agrees sullenly, glaring. She has worked out that this is his way of pronouncing 'yes'.

Well, it's a response. Maybe if she can just make him seeâ€|but she's running out of patience fast and she can't help but feel that she's burning down a very short candle that's about to be obliterated in dragon-flame. Quite literally â€" her shoulders _itch_ with the need to turn around and watch for the Night Fury.

Baby talk, she reminds herself, _and unclench your teeth again, Astrid!_

"Dragons," she says, "kill Vikings. Bad. Vikings kill dragons. Bad. Dragons eat Viking food. Bad."

He shrugs, jerking away from her and fidgeting across the rocks, prowling across them as if searching for something.

"Hiccup, listen!"

Hiccup snarls at her, a rapid snap of glaring and teeth and hissing. He knows she's there, he's just thinking quite hard about something else. She wonders what. What does he have to care about, stranded here?

She struggles to get her message down to the very basics, and comes up with "Hiccup say dragons go."

He ignores her for a bit to peer over some of the rocks and say something complicated in his dragon's voice. It sounds upset and stressed and harassed, and he keeps looking back at her as if the conversation is about her.

It makes Astrid only a little less nervous to know that Toothless is not sneaking up behind her, assuming that Hiccup isn't smart enough â€" and he might be â€" to play decoy and pretend to be talking to his dragon companion while the Night Fury ambushes her.

She really wishes she hadn't thought that. Against her will, she can't help but sneak a glance over her shoulder. No intelligent, lethal black dragon.

Finally Hiccup looks back at her and makes a complicated noise that it had taken her _days_ to figure out meant both him and Toothless at once, and follows it up with "iss kko, bad herrr bad iss kko."

Astrid translates that as meaning that he and Toothless are going to leave, to go, because this place â€" he could mean the shoreline or the entire island â€" is bad. But it's not what she meant, and he can't leave now, she won't let him. She needs him to be here, at least until the other dragons are not.

Horrible thoughts swirl in her head, ways to keep him on Berk, thoughts she almost hopes she wouldn't be having if she wasn't so worn-down and desperate, drowning and catching at anything she can, however small and unlikely. Most of them revolve around Toothless. Could they capture the Night Fury, if they had to? What would they need to do that? How many warriors would she lose in that attempt? Could she make Hiccup understand the concept of a trade â€" him sending the dragons away for Toothless' life?

Would any of them _survive_ that?

Visions of Berk in flames before a black dragon advancing at a steady walk like death itself, Toothless and Stoick locked in mortal combat for the soul of the dragon-boy, warriors she's responsible for dying under Hiccup's claws and Toothless' very real teeth, something going wrong and Toothless being killed in self-defense and Hiccup dying of grief with Viking blood on his hands " this is a bad plan, and even angry and exhausted and frustrated as she is Astrid abandons it.

"No," she says instead, "not you and Toothless. Those dragons." She points out to sea and then, seeing angry puzzlement on his face, puts her fingers up to her still-bloody cheek and holds the result out to him. "Hiccup say these dragons go."

The dragon-boy growls sullenly at her, twisting his head away in what might be a refusal and might be incomprehension and might just be frustration. He's not allowed to be frustrated, she thinks angrily. She has all the frustration there is and there's none left over for him.

"Say dragons go!" she insists, voice rising even though she knows that shouting at him will not help.

Finally he shrugs and says, "Nuh."

Astrid sees absolute red for a brief moment before realizing that he had said something more after that and she'd been so angry she hadn't heard it through the roar of her racing pulse in her ears. "What?" This is too general, she knows, so she waves her hand in the way that they've established to mean _say it/do it again._

Hiccup actually rolls his eyes " she's seen Toothless do something similar, lowering his eyelids and turning his eyes up as if not wanting to look at whatever stupid thing is annoying him anymore, usually a Terror. Then he makes the same complicated Hiccup-and-Toothless-together noise and adds "nuh drakkkn chfff " but if there was anything more after that he doesn't repeat it, because he stops short and goes blank and still, staring into the distance and through her completely, ignoring her.

Astrid has had a very long day and it's not even noon yet. She is tired, battered, frustrated, grieving, and out of patience. She is not up to comprehending anything more complicated than the fact that he's just refused to help her again and is now ignoring her completely in favor of leaping to another, slightly lower, rock and peering around it to talk intently to Toothless. He hadn't cared about what she had said but he's intensely interested in whatever meaningless dragon thing has caught his attention now " his shoulders are tight and his posture riveted, and while she can't understand a word that he's saying, if they're even words, she can hear the excitement and interest and maybe more than a little bit of fear in them.

How dare he? How dare he not only turn down another request for help but turn his back on her?

It's too much. She has had enough. She has lives to save and no more time to humor an animal who shouldn't be one; she needs him to rejoin the rest of the world.

Which is when she notices that he's done something he's never done before.

He has turned his back on her.

Hiccup is always watching her, directly or sideways-on or out of the corner of his eye. If he doesn't know where she is then Toothless is watching her for him. But whatever it is he finds so much more interesting than her asking him for help has gotten his attention so strongly that he is not watching her at all.

She is tempted to act on impulse and leap at him, shaking him like she wants so badly to do. She'd fist her hands in the worn leather stretched across his shoulders and drag him off the rock and onto the ground so she can shout at him. Astrid tries to imagine what would happen next, and briefly enjoys the image of him twisting in her hands, startled and squawking with rage and surprise. She'd jam her knee into his lower back and stay out of his reach, pull his overlong hair for him and see how he liked it, her hands would hit borrowed dragon scales one second and human flesh the next and she'd pummel both equally. But then they'd just be fighting on the ground again like they'd never started talking instead, and although it's tempting she bites her lip and doesn't do that.

She compromises. She sneaks up behind him, gets hold of an ankle, and drags him down from the rock as hard as she can, but lets him go as soon as he hits the ground. As she'd expected, he rolls up to a crouch roaring in surprise, furious, so she does something probably even stupider.

She gets in close, shoving him against the rock and jamming her forearm up against his throat, hooking one foot behind his legs to keep him off balance. He fights like a dragon â€" he pounces, he slinks, he gets his claws into his enemy and shakes it, but except when he jumps he does it on four feet and keeps his balance low. He doesn't balance on his own two feet very well, and he knows it, struggling to get away and not able to gain enough traction to do so. Her arms are positioned to keep him away from the gloves still at his belt as much as possible â€" he's trying very hard to get to them and he will get past her guard through sheer strength if she doesn't take advantage of this very fast â€" and he can't lower his head to bite with her arm in the way. She's not trying to choke him, though; he can breathe.

"Listen to me!" Astrid yells into his face, fed up. "People are dying! Real people! People like you â€" like Aka!" she says, suddenly absolutely sure that he will understand that and that it will hurt and serve him right for not caring about anyone else but himself and that bloody dragon he dotes on!

And that bloody dragon has just announced his arrival with an eerie, enraged whistling shriek like lightning if lightning warned its victims ahead of time, materializing as a blur of black-glossed scales that emerges from the tumble of rocks. She knows that Toothless has reacted to the attack on his companion and she has only moments to live. It almost doesn't matter to her, outside this one moment. Instead of doing the sensible thing, the cowardly thing, she turns her attention away from Hiccup for a brief second and shouts "No!" at the Night Fury.

Toothless rears up, wings flaring out, and screams, but he cannot blast her. She is too close to Hiccup, and the dragon will never endanger his dragon-boy, who has interpreted his way through her last comment and is roaring wordlessly at her rather than trying to get away for a moment.

At the sound of his mother's name, give or take a few sounds, Hiccup howls in fury and gets one hand past her guard, slashing back at her as quick as thought. He hasn't managed to get to his claws yet, and Astrid is hanging on as hard as she can to his left wrist, so only worn-down human fingernails scrape across her hairline and down across her forehead, and she shakes off the lesser pain.

"You don't care!" she chants over his snarls. "Damn you! You don't care! All you care about is dragons!" Oh, she wants to hurt him. It won't bring back the people who died this morning because she's failed to get through to him, but she wants to anyway. "While Vikings die!"

He understands at least part of that, because he growls back at her, "_Pfikingr_ bad!"

"No we're not! Damn it, Hiccup! Stop and listen to me!"

Stop is a word he knows, and sort of _listen_, and for one brief miraculous moment he does. He's glaring furiously but he's not trying to hit her right at this moment.

"Okay?" Astrid asks, seizing her chance. "It's okay, Hiccup." She forces her voice to calm down, hoping he'll do the same.

They stare at each other for a frozen moment with Toothless' shadow across them. She's still got him pinned against the rock and off balance and he doesn't like it.

Damn, but he's taller than she is. She hates that. For a moment from this angle she can see the human he should have been, and for that brief moment it's a man and not a dragon under her hands, if only in her mind. She hates that too.

The dragon looming behind him croons and squawks something angry and protective, and the dragon-boy croaks back at him, sounding annoyed but not particularly hurt. He waves a hand in a way she thinks might be a signal to stand down, that he'll handle this himself. She is _annoyed_ that she has learned to read him but she can't get the simplest concept through to him.

Finally he jerks his head away as if ignoring her, relaxing a little under her hands. It could be a feint, and if it is she'll regret it, but one of them is going to kill her if she keeps this up.

"Okay," she says softly. "We're good. Hiccup, are we good?"

"Isss," he mutters.

She shifts her grip from imprisoning to just holding him there. It's the longest she's been in physical contact with him, ever. And he really hates it. He's trying to push himself back into the rock and her away at the same time, hands fluttering, reluctant to touch her

and break the agreed-on truce â€" she _hopes_ they have agreed on a truce â€" but not wanting her Viking human hands on him.

Astrid steps back just a little. She doesn't go far, and she keeps her hands out to intercept him if he leaps for her or to stop him from bolting, and she doesn't move away far enough that Toothless, who is still crouched to pounce with his tail swishing wildly and teeth imprisoning an angry growl, has a clear shot. She's still keeping him where he is, but she's backed off.

Hiccup glares at her, his whole body shuddering convulsively as if her touch had been poison and hunching slightly. He's mostly leaning against the rock rather than crouched on all fours but he still keeps his hands low.

Bare hands.

Astrid can't draw very well but he's not _stupid_â€|

"Vikings aren't bad," she says, watching the space between them and waiting for an opportunity, trying to get the idea into his head. "Your mother â€" mama â€" 'Aka' â€" was a Viking, did you know that?"

She thinks he recognizes all the important words in that sentence, more or less, because she can see the rejection spread across his expressive face. "Nuh. _Pfikingr_ mama drakkkn dead!"

"Your mother was Valka of Berk, Hiccup. Stoick is your father. 'Aka' was a Viking. And so are you."

He looks at her like she's crazy, like she's foaming at the mouth and biting at people. He says his name in that guttural way she can't really pronounce and asserts, "_drakkkn!_"

Astrid leaps at him again, taking her life in her hands and grabbing one of his. She sets her feet instinctively against his panicked attempt to pull away, using him as a human shield to protect her from the fire-breathing, now very angry dragon. "Look!" she shouts at him, frustrated by his denial of what is, to her, obvious.

Using her other hand to keep his wrist in place, she manages to press their palms together. Their hands are different sizes but clearly the same shape. "We're the same, Hiccup. You're not a dragon. You're human â€" a Viking, like me â€" and we need you to help us."

The dragon-boy stops trying to struggle away from her, staring in absolute horror at the convergence of their hands as if he's never noticed the similarity before, and maybe he hasn't. For a moment she relaxes, thinking that she's gotten through to him, that the intelligent mind buried under dragon scales has gotten the idea.

He stares. He trembles â€" she can feel his pulse racing where she holds his wrist. She's tempted to try to calm him, gentle him. Her hand itches to pet him like a frightened child, which is, for a moment, what he looks like. Involuntarily, her thumb rubs across that galloping beat under his skin.

"See?" she says softly. Astrid turns her hand just slightly and folds her fingers between his, showing him how they match up, trying to

pull him back to humanity through the simplest possible method of a hand to hold. "Look at yourself, Hiccup. You're human."

He's completely silent, utterly still except for the shaking. And she sees terror bloom in his eyes.

Fortunately for Astrid, she has trained to anticipate movements around her. She drops his hand and pulls back just in time to avoid the handful of dragon-claws on his free right hand that he has just tried to tear her face off with. Still, one scores a long and bloody gash across her cheekbone, missing the eye.

But however much that wound hurts, it is clearly nothing to what she has done to him. He shrieks, a terrified, horrified, furious, completely inhuman sound that puts a block of ice in the center of her chest, looking at the bare hand she'd held as if it were stabbing him in his own heart.

Something that might be his name and "drakkkn!" he howls at her, shaking his head furiously, trying to shake that idea out of his head, and Astrid realizes she has made a huge mistake, because his grasp of Norse is slipping away from him and the dragonish noises returning.

A single scrambling leap takes him to Toothless, and onto the dragon's back in the next. From this safe place he crouches between the dragon's shoulders and roars at her.

About the only thing she can understand of the things he screams at her is that he is a dragon, that he flies, that he comes from an egg, and then she has no idea what the next statement is meant to be, but it must be some dragonish thing that she has no frame of reference for and he takes for granted, because she can hear the way he pronounces his name in there along with what almost looks like a submissive crouch much belied by the anger he throws at her.

The next thing she can pick out from the rage is the name of the dragon that Stoick hates so badly, the one that had taken him as a baby, and that she still can't pronounce or figure out what it is supposed to be. And sure enough she hears Hiccup's name as well and "uh-thrrr mama hrtrt!"

His anger is further enraging Toothless as well, who lowers his head and flares his wings back and stalks towards her, threatening. Her human shield is gone and he suddenly looks nothing at all like the clever, affectionate companion who played with Hiccup on the beach and took fish from his hands and rolled his eyes when he was amused. Now he truly does look like death's child.

Astrid is going to die under the wrath of a Night Fury after all. She has cheated her fate for a few weeks but it has come back to get her again. Running from it had only postponed it and she will not further shame herself by trying again. She is a warrior. She accepts her death.

She looks it in the eye, and holds her ground, regretting that she has failed to save her people but hoping the gods will know that she tried.

And if she must die, at least she dies honorably, facing a creature

that has given her and her people nightmares, beautiful in its deadliness and a worthy foe. She can see in his eyes his anger at her because she has hurt the one he loves, see his protectiveness of the dragon-boy now riding properly on his back. The two are almost like one being as they move, perfectly in unison, perfectly focused, rider communicating to dragon and dragon communicating back to rider as if there is no line between them. She has seen Hiccup ride on Toothless' back before, but never like this. Never for real.

If she had seen this, she never would have thought of him as human.

Astrid stands her ground and does not close her eyes as Toothless leaps for her, roaring.

For the second time inside an hour she flies across the shoreline under attack by a dragon.

When she can think again there's mud in her hair to match the dragon blood, and seawater in her eyes, and something unspeakable in her mouth, but she must be alive. No afterlife would include sand down her back, and if it does Astrid is going to have serious words with someone. She hurts but she can't smell human blood. Head reeling, she tries to sit up.

The Viking woman doesn't get that far. She only manages to prop herself up on one elbow before something with claws hits her, flipping her over onto her back and holding her there.

Astrid looks up past the dragon paw pinning her to the ground and Toothless' all-too-fanged, burning snarl into the frozen-pine eyes of the creature who should have been Hiccup of Berk.

"Uh strrrr_tt_," he says, and it's barely human, "kkko."

And Toothless lets her up; he moves his paw only as far as it takes to stomp down right next to her instead of on her chest.

Gods help her. The one human quality he possesses, and it's _mercy_.

She has been given her life.

She goes.

The failure and the shame and the shock hurt worse than the beatings both dragons have given her today.

She takes absolutely no pleasure in hearing behind her, as she walks away from a chance to save her people that she has probably lost for them, an inhuman wail of absolute confusion and fear.

* * *

><p>To be continued.

13. Chapter 13

ON WITH THE SHOW!

Nightfall****, Part Thirteen****

Chasing her away has not sent away her shadow in his mind â€" it chews on him like a predator holding his spine in its jaws â€" and shadows in the mind cannot be screamed away.

Hiccup tries anyway, shutting his eyes to hunt it better after he hides from it like he and his Toothless-self were hiding from the sickbadwrongthing in the fallen rocks before she came and attacked him. If it does not know where they are, perhaps it will not find them and try to take his heart away from him again. They had been lying in wait for the sickbadwrongthing to try to take Toothless again and it had not come, it had sent her instead and she had ambushed them.

He can try to pretend that he did not understand the things she shouted at them, even though she has been teaching him all those sounds just so she can do this to him, he realizes, betrayed, because even if he had sort of understood the noises they had made no sense. He knows what he is. He is a dragon. Of course he is a dragon, dragon us we flying us together us nest us together dragon, he whimpers.

With his eyes closed he cannot see his clever paws that he has been so proud of all his life, clenched before him on Toothless' shoulders and wrapped around the flying-with with his desire to take off and away from here, reflected all through his body and the desperate thrum in the deepest parts of his voice that are as involuntary as breathing, begging go we go flying flee run scared hide go we scared. And Toothless responds, half of them sensing the desires and fears of the other half as one being, and Hiccup does not even open his eyes as the black dragon takes off running with his companion still on his back; even terrified and shattered he belongs on Toothless' shoulders as they race across the shoreline and scramble up the rocks that lead them to their cave, which is not safe from the sickbadwrongthing but where she cannot follow them.

But her shadow does. Her shadow has torn and flayed the clever paws that make him valuable and precious to his nest and his family even though he doesn't fly as well as they do and his teeth are not as sharp and he cannot breathe fire. None of that matters, because he is a dragon with clever paws that he has used to protect them and care for them and free them from traps and make patterns for them to look at and heal wounds and now she has taken those from him and made them wrong, she has made them human.

He refuses to look at them. Still with his eyes closed, he shoves them into his claws and hides them from himself. Only then does he dare to open his eyes, shaking as if it were the depths of winter and he has fallen in the water trying to fish.

They are good claws. He is not human. He is a dragon.

Except he knows what his paws look like underneath the worn leather of the claws and he saw that they were the same shape as hers, that his clever paws are not the only ones. For a moment he wonders if she is confused, if she is a dragon with clever paws like his and she does not know it, that she is the one who is wrong.

But he can see her clearly the way he cannot see himself except for Toothless who is himself; she is one of the pfikingr that he has feared all his life. She uses pfikingr words so quickly that he can barely pronounce them; she does not talk like a dragon. She is an enemy of dragons, a hunter and killer of his kind. She had confronted him with dragon blood in her fur and the stink of battle-hate-fear on her. She answers to a pfikingr Alpha, she lives with many of them, she wears metal. She is not a dragon.

But their paws are the same.

Human. He cannot bear the idea of it. Pfikingr do not even come from eggs like good dragons like them, what sort of impossible terrible creature doesn't come from an egg?

He does not want to be human; he knows nothing good of pfikingr except that they can be stolen from and he does not know if there are humans who are not pfikingr, and even when she had fed him she had done so as she said with her body that she was hunting him and could not be trusted. Humans shout at him and try to hurt them, and these humans shot them out of the sky and made them remember sad bad angry-making things and now one has hurt him again.

No no liar no liar no no no liar no! he wails repeatedly, the sound mixing with his gasps for breath.

She must have been lying. Hiccup understands lying, dragons can lie with their bodies and their voices and their actions, and they can scream danger where there is none or pretend no food when they have made a kill that they do not want to share. Except when the lie is clearly in playfulness and teasing, liars are hateful because they endanger the flock. Surely she had been lying and trying to hurt him because she has no claws and he had painted her face with blood.

But he is an expert reader of body language and she talks so loud. She would not know how to hide that she was lying; her body and her voice and her eyes had said true true true honest sure confident real along with angry upset tired hurting angry fight.

Hiccup is barely aware that he is making a pained and desperate sound, vocalizing aloud through a lifetime of habit and the strength of the horror rolling through him like waves in a storm, the waves that snatch dragons who fly too low and pull them down like a pouncing lurking predator, tearing apart wings and freezing heart-fires under ice and water. It is a broken, frightened, small sound, breathless and cowering, and he has pressed himself against Toothless' back and shoulders as close as he can get, hiding his face and hunching his shoulders. His terror is drowning his thoughts and part of him cannot think "cannot feel anything but the fear and the denial and the need to get away, to hide" and part of him cannot stop thinking and remembering. He curls his claws into his palms until they threaten to cut through and draw his own blood. He doesn't care. Not if it's human blood.

But he is aware of Toothless' fear and pain reflecting his own as the bigger dragon tries to twist around to look at his own shoulders and the little dragon perched there, whimpering questions and reassurances and protectiveness. Toothless manages to get a careful fang into the skins on his back feet and pulls, urging his companion down where he can be held properly.

The dragon-boy obeys blindly, numbly, crouching down in the dust and sand inside the mouth of their cave, desperately trying to deny the nightmare in his head.

He is not human! He cannot be human! He and Toothless are halves of a whole, and _Toothless_ is a dragon, so he must be too, because _pfikigr_ and dragons are enemies! They belong in the nest with their family! He hears the Alpha! He can talk to his nest-mates and _pfikigr_ do not talk! He has slept in the nests of eggs to keep them warm against the cold until their heart-fires can light and he has talked to those eggs so they will learn the voice of the flock and dragons would never let a _human_ do that!

Humans are monsters " _pfikigr_ kill dragons! Hiccup is terrified of the ones who kill dragons, have trapped and killed nest-mates and flock-kin and family. He has run from them and avoided them all his life and now there is one inside his head he cannot escape from, even when he flees into the nest that they have made here and wraps his paws " the ones _she_ has taken away from him " over his head, hiding, crying out helplessly in desperation and despair.

His dragon-love tries to settle next to him, to wrap him in a warm dark wing and keep him there and safe until he quiets and is himself again, crooning _love you love calm easy breathing love good calm you good together we calm safe nest calm_ and trying to purr deep in his chest to reassure his beloved-companion.

But Hiccup hides there only a moment before a thought occurs to him and he scrambles back to the mouth of the cave and out into the light, claws scratching the stone with his haste. She is wrong! He can see that she is wrong!

There are raining clouds far off and coming but there is sun now and he can see his shadow cast on the rock of the ledge. It is the shape of a dragon, and he pants with relief, seeing the familiar silhouette of a small and different dragon, but still a dragon, because there are many, many kinds of dragons and they are all different. He spreads out a wing to catch the sun and make a shadow that will hunt _her_ shadow down and dive on it from the sky to tear it apart. In the sunlight where he crouches there is a dragon on the stone.

But his mind betrays him and he remembers making the wings that he didn't have, watching his nest-mates and then making the fin to stabilize him when the wings alone were not enough, and that he had taken the scales that Toothless shed and put them onto the skins so that they would be the same. His claws come off, and beneath them there are _human_ paws; beneath the scales there is skin like hers but with spots sometimes.

Panic overwhelming him, he turns back to the part of his life and himself that is always there and has followed him and will follow him no matter how far he runs away. Toothless is his heart; _Toothless_ will be his eyes. They will see the truth and the dragon who is his other half will tell him what he is so that he never has to question himself again because of _her_ lies!

Look you beloved look me look begging frightened small scared me fear look what? curious frightened, Hiccup pleads to his dragon-half, putting his claws to his mouth and biting into the

leather to pull them off one by one. They fall discarded to the stone at his side. Then he raises those treacherous paws to the black dragon's nose, crouching against the ground submissively and kneeling before Toothless as though he were the great king who is their Alpha and holding their lives " their life " in his jaws. He stares into green eyes and will not see the faint reflection there, so does not.

Mine! Toothless says, nudging both paws aside with his nose and nuzzling the face behind them, trying to encourage his dragon-boy to breathe slower and calm down by example and his proximity. _Mine mine love you us mine good mine!_

Hiccup clicks his name " the singular name for this half of him, not the both combined " and croaks the sound they make for _human_ questioningly. Then he repeats his name and cries their flock-sound desperately, trying to insist _drakkkn!_ To his shock it ends on a begging questioning note that in a human would be _please_?

When Toothless hesitates too long it is not the reflection Hiccup sees " it is the sorrow in his dragon-love's eyes.

The dragon-boy's world collapses around him, and he lowers his _human_ paws to the ground and lets his fur hang into his eyes, unable to look at the grief in those eyes he knows so well, because Toothless will not lie to him " but has been lying to him " but will not lie to him now.

This secret has been kept from him all his life and he cannot reconcile it with everything he knows and everything he is or ever has been. He is a _dragon!_

But he is not.

Hiccup wails, wordlessly and meaninglessly, betrayal and loss and confusion tearing through him. And " worst of all " he is alone. If he is human then he is not a dragon and he cannot be half of the pair that is _Tt-(click)-th-phuh-ss_ and he is _nothing and no one!_

Somewhere on the outside of the darkness burying him, crushing him, he can hear Toothless howling his own grief, trying to apologize, curling himself around his other half and insisting _love love love you mine us love together love mine you mine you mine love we together us you flock us family you love!_

The dragon-boy can hear it, and it hurts; all he has left of his life and the part of his life who matters to him most of all is suffering and it is his fault because he is _wrong_, he is a _monster_, he is not what he thought he was. Hiccup screams, not caring who hears that he is furious and heartbroken and distraught, vocalizing his despair in dragon shrieks and cries, like he's breaking inside.

And then something does, and he weeps hysterically, convulsively, gasping in shock and pain and bewilderment at the feeling and taste of the tears. There is ocean in him that he did not know about and he is drowning in it! He has not wept since he was very small " dragons do not cry. He doesn't remember how to do so, he doesn't even remember that he could do so, but his body is doing it without asking him. The tears confuse and utterly terrify him " they are a small

thing but they are a small thing in a sea of big things that are eating him alive.

Panicked, he cries until he cannot breathe properly like when they have flown too high chasing the moon on crazy-feeling nights when the moon is too bright and almost close enough to catch if they could just go fast enough and high enough " and now they will _never_ catch it! " paws shaking and head spinning and the edges of his world disappearing in grey until the dragon-boy is sick and retching like he is trying to throw up bad not-food. But it is not food that is choking him; it is an idea. It is a fact that he cannot hide from and cannot escape because the fact is himself.

His entire life is ending.

If he is human then it doesn't just mean he isn't what he's always known he is: it means he _no longer belongs_.

Humans, Vikings, are dangerous, evil; they are monsters, they are killers of dragons. _He_ is a monster.

But for almost all of his life he has also been a good dragon, a good flock-member; he loves his nest-mates and will do anything to protect them. Even if he cannot be one of the flock because of what he is then he will still protect them.

He must leave them.

He must get as far away from his family as he can before the monster he must be " if he's human " comes out and hurts the ones he loves.

Sometimes the old or wounded dying ones of his family fly out alone to outrun the ice-cold death that flies after them, or to fly after it and attack it, or to lead it away from the flock so the death will not take any more of the ones they love.

Hiccup will go. He will not bring this thing that he is back to his family, he will lead the death away and when it takes him it will not matter because he will not hurt his family. He will die alone but he will be the only one to die.

There is a worse thing lurking in that knowledge and he cannot face it but it will pounce on him soon. He can feel it behind his mind like dragon-cousins hunting them for trespassing on their island, like a hiding-hunting-cousin who has changed all his colors to look like the rocks or a tree or the ground, but is slinking towards them to strike. He cannot see it, but he knows it is there, and he knows it will hurt when it catches him, but he does not know how to outrun it or hide from it because he does not know where it is.

The dragon-boy cannot stop crying even though he cannot breathe. The pain is new, the grief is stronger. He has only the faintest memories of his mother's death long ago when he was small, and he certainly does not remember the agony and loneliness of it " he remembers that he was hurting and lonely, that all the nest was hurting and lonely because the flock had loved his mother, but he does not remember the feeling of the pain. Since then he has dealt with it after a fashion, even if that way was to burn it to ashes and let them fly away and forget and grow up and be a dragon with his family,

salving his hurts and stitching closed the torn-open pieces of himself with their love for him.

This is new and raw.

Hiccup is intelligent and imaginative and this is so much more than just old pain reawakened like before. This is too immediate and too unthinkable. His mind will not stop working even though his body is trying to, driving him in panic to retch and gasp and flood with ocean, and he can imagine in vivid detail and agonizing pain the rest of his life, however brief, alone.

And that is the worse thing. That is the worst thing possible.

He must leave Toothless.

Hiccup loves his Toothless-half more than anything: more than air, more than his own life, more than flight, more than the sunlight. They are the same person, inseparable, as much so and more as halves of a two-heads-cousin/s or twins hatched from the same egg, although he has always known they did not even if they should have because Toothless is bigger than he is and egg-pairs usually look similar. If he had been asked to drown to give his dragon-half one more breath of air he would do it; he would starve if it meant Toothless could live. He knows as sure as he knows up from down and dark from light and water from air that Toothless would do the same for him.

If he is a monster, a Viking, a human, he cannot put Toothless in danger. If he will not risk his family, he cannot risk his heart.

Toothless is a dragon; he knows this, he has always known this, and this has not changed. He has noticed that she treats this half of him one way and the dragon-half of him another, and he had thought that she was afraid of Toothless because the black dragon is the bigger of the two of them and had blasted fire at her. But now it is more proof that he is not what he has always thought he was.

He must protect Toothless above all. This means the unthinkable thing of having to separate the two halves of himself, which might kill him, but then the monster inside will never escape, and he will never hurt a dragon more than he is about to do.

Being human will take everything away from him, even his own heart and half himself. Being human is the same as dying.

For them, he must lose everything. He must go.

He cannot bring himself to. Hiccup crouches beneath his dragon-love's wing and leans against his side and trembles. Knowing he must abandon his dragon-love who is his other half hurts too much to weep over; even the ocean inside him has frozen.

Sensing the change for the worse in his beloved's temper, Toothless raises the wing slightly and turns his head to look and decide what to do. His nostrils flare, and Hiccup cannot imagine what he can smell of his grief — his human nose cannot detect it. Can he smell the loneliness and the horror and the wanting-to-die?

Perhaps he can, because Toothless leaps to his feet, knocking the heartbroken dragon-boy to the ground, and places one gentle paw on his chest in a quite different way than how he had pinned _her_ earlier. _No!_ the black dragon roars, protesting.

Hiccup turns his face away and closes his eyes, knowing that he must lose the one he loves most because of what he is.

Toothless refuses to let him do so. _No!_ he insists again. _You you mine!_

The dragon-boy wails _pfikingr_ and shows Toothless his bare _human_ _paws_ without opening his eyes to avoid the newly hateful sight of them.

The black dragon growls. _No!_ he repeats, and his tone and snarls and breath say that this is important and Hiccup had better listen to him. _Pfikingr hatchling_.

Obedient to that familiar tone, Hiccup looks up at him through the paws, blinking to hold back the grief that is trying to take over him again. But he listens.

Pfikingr hatchling, Toothless emphasizes. He drops his nose to his beloved's face, pushing the raised paws aside again, and nuzzles him. _Dragon you_. Love you love mine love._

He snaps lightly at one of Hiccup's paws, gently pulling it into his mouth and hanging onto it with no teeth, refusing to let go. He does not remember doing this the first time as a hatchling, but he has done it uncountable times since then. He likes the way that Hiccup tastes " not to eat, he would never _ever ever_ try to eat him " but just in the same way he loves the way that Hiccup looks and sounds and _is_.

Mine, he growls through this. _You mine._ He stops to make sure that Hiccup has gotten the idea, and then adds, _We us._

The dragon-boy under his paw trembles uncontrollably, and then tries to sit up. Toothless lets him, because anything is better than seeing him lie there and smelling ocean and want-to-die in the little dragon who is his life and his love. _Bite!_ Hiccup commands suddenly, holding out the other paw that Toothless is not holding in his mouth and snapping his own teeth illustratively. _Paws bite go paws bad you paws bite pfikingr paws bad bite begging bite bite not want paws you bite!_

No, Toothless refuses " he is not going to bite off Hiccup's paws just because the _pfikingr_ she has upset him with them. _Paws you paws good love you_.

Toothless purrs around the paw that he's holding, and releases it with an affectionate lick. He drops his nose to touch the point on Hiccup's chest over his heart, feeling his companion's pulse racing in fear and distress and desperation.

Dragon you, he says, and nudges. _Dragon here._

And when Hiccup wraps his paws around the black dragon's head and holds onto him tightly he smells a little less of grief and a little

more of hope.

Love love love love love, Toothless purrs, and to his everlasting joy Hiccup gasps in a deeper breath than any he's taken since he fought with _her_ and rubs his cheek against the bigger dragon's, returning the sentiment that is the core of who they are.

A little while later his jaws are wet all over again and there is ocean on both of them at once, and Toothless hums a quiet question that vibrates through them both, dragon and dragon-man held in gentle paws.

Hiccup tries to purr " he is happy, he is _loved_, he is not a monster as long as he has Toothless with him to be his heart, no one with such a dragon for a heart could be a monster. He is a dragon; he can still be a dragon even if he does have human paws and even if he had been a human as a hatchling it does not matter because he is not human now. No one in the nest " his nest! his home! his family! He is not a monster and he does not endanger the flock! " ever holds hatchlings responsible for anything they do or anything they are.

He does not know why he is crying now when he is so happy. The ocean in him is strange.

But this crying hurts a little less. It feels like after his paws were caught in a dragon-trap that he was letting a flock-mate out of and the bones in them were broken. They took so long to heal, and they hurt when they did but it was _good_ because it was healing and he could use them again.

* * *

><p>Toothless raises his head and scents the wind. This place is not good for them anymore and he does not want to be here. Too many bad things can find them here and it is no longer a refuge. This is not their nest. Their nest is far away and they will go back there still together as one.<p>

Go? Hiccup asks from where he is leaning against Toothless' shoulder, still somewhat subdued but better now than he was.

Toothless does not remember ever realizing that Hiccup had been human at some point; he has always known it, but not cared or ever bothered to say anything about it, because Hiccup is _Hiccup_. _He is _his_, and to Toothless, Hiccup _is_ him. He is so very much a dragon anyway. That he happens to be in a human skin is not his fault " he is just in the wrong skin. These things happen. Toothless thinks he would not be a good Viking at all, but he is a very good dragon, so it is better that he be a dragon, because then they can be the two-who-are-one together.

It is quite simple.

The black dragon lowers his muzzle again and breathes into his beloved-companion's fur. _Yes good go flying hide us go good yes_, he reassures his companion. His wing is still sore and they will not get very far but the wind is good and they can use it to get further than they could from a launch with no wind. _Go no sun sneaky us flying._ They will leave when it is dark so that no one will see them

go.

There are other islands, and perhaps they can find one with no _pfikingr_ and the _sickbadwrongthing_ will have to look for them all over again. Anywhere else but here. Too many nightmares are hunting them here.

Hiccup turns his face up to the bigger dragon and purrs relief and gratitude. He does not want to stay anymore either, and summons up enough enthusiasm to leap to the flying-with on Toothless' shoulders and be ready to fly with the knowledge that they are leaving.

Together they watch the winds change and the waves roll, waiting for the right moment to leave as the sky darkens with the sun going and the clouds coming.

Toothless rejoices in the impending flight and that they are still together and senses the same emotions reflecting back to him from his other half and is glad of it. No _pfikingr_ will take his Hiccup-self away from him.

When the sky is right Toothless braces himself and leaps to catch the wind, spreading his wings into it like flying in the storm and letting it blow them away from this island full of dangers and nightmares. From his back he hears Hiccup sigh as clearly as he can hear the wind he angles his wings and their bodies into, beating those wings strongly to gain altitude and look for a better place to hide until the battered wing is fully healed and they can safely go home together. Tonight they will not fight the wind or play in it; for now they will only ride it carefully and later-soon they will fly acrobatically faster than anyone else and laughing together in the sky.

* * *

><p>Later that night, in the new nest that is a sheltered overhang above a river and out of the rain that is raining now like the clouds said it would, Toothless is all but asleep when he feels Hiccup stir and sit up under his extended wing.<p>

The dragon-man trills a realization of a memory of a realization from before excitedly. _Toothless-love!_ he calls out.

Toothless rumbles a sleepy question and does not raise the wing to see underneath it. Hiccup crawls out from under it anyway, the better to look at the bigger dragon.

Sickbadwrongthing! Hiccup whistles, but he does not sound distressed, like it has come for him and tried to make him walk around in his sleep like it did to Toothless. He sounds interested, which is good, because his mood and bearing have steadily improved ever since they left the island full of dangerous nightmares and bad mind things. Flying always helps them to feel better again when they are sad or scared, and the freedom of knowing that they are not pursued and can escape from any hunters is like the crazy-joy of chasing the moon. But it is also a little bad, because Toothless wants to rest.

After they had found this place and made it theirs the rain had

started so they did not want to go hunting in it. Instead the both of them have curled up and discussed more carefully among themselves the things that _she_ had told them now that Hiccup can think about the worst thing she said and know it does not matter what he looks like, what matters is what he is. It was sneaky of _her_ to hunt them with a sharp thing made of ideas rather than a sharp thing of metal but she has not cut them in half and they will heal.

They have decided that it was _possible_ that their mama Aka had been a human " they both remember that she flew with Cloudjumper like Hiccup flies with Toothless. Toothless does seem to remember that she had moved more on her hind legs than most dragons and Hiccup thinks that she had fur on her head like he does but longer. He sort of remembers pulling on it. Maybe she had been a Viking hatchling too but had grown up to be a dragon like Hiccup is. They have agreed that they had been too young to remember properly and that they should ask Cloudjumper when they get home, but only once he has finished scolding them and then growling at them sulkily every time he sees them after that.

They had also agreed that it was a ridiculous thing to say that the Viking Alpha could be their mother's mate, and that _Cloudjumper_ had been their mother's mate and that there was no doubt about that. Toothless thinks that the Viking _chfff_ had been trying to steal them from their proper Alpha and take them away so he had said a lie to the _pfikingr_ she to tell them, because if she does not know how to hide that she is hunting she probably does not know how to see lies either.

By now Toothless is not interested in _sickbadwrongthings_ that he does not know what they are or where they come from or what they want with them. He growls at the sound of the idea.

Here calling dragon calling flock, says Hiccup. He tips his head to one side inquisitively. Toothless doesn't bother to suppress the urge to groan, and sighs thunderously. He knows _that_ look. It's another good sign that Hiccup is himself again, but it tells the black dragon that whatever this is about, they are going to get in trouble for it from _some_one_.

Hiccup asks with a whistle of questioning curiosity and a half-submissive crouch, _Alpha here?_

Now he's got Toothless' attention. _Sickbadwrongthing Alpha here flock?_ Toothless asks, crooning skeptically. It is difficult for him to put the two concepts together. But he considers it, because Hiccup is clever and thinks of things that no other dragon can. No other dragon would have thought to make new wings.

He does not like what they are thinking together. An Alpha would be able to tell dragons to do something they did not want to, like raid a _pfikingr_ nest often even when the _pfikingr_ are prepared to fight dragons. _Their_ nest would never be foolish enough to raid so often and so heavily. Toothless would be able to hear an Alpha more easily than Hiccup could, because while Hiccup _can_ hear their king they have learned from each other in the past that Toothless can hear him better. And he remembers the way that the hunting blue-spikes cousin they had fought had spoken of a _SHE_ with fear in its voice. And so had the maddened fire-skin that had found them in the cave and that Toothless had driven away.

Hiccup and Toothless have lived all their lives under the rule of an ancient and experienced Alpha who is a good king of dragons. They respect him, but they have never been afraid of him. His flock is obedient to him and loves him and he is a _good king_.

But there are other Alphas. Some of them try to steal passing dragons for their flocks like the Viking Alpha had tried to do, and it could be that this one has tried to steal them, because
Tt-(click)-th-phuh-ss are the best of dragons together.

Toothless pins his ear-flaps back to his head and growls nervously. He does not like this idea at all. But he must admit that it is possible.

Maybe not sure maybe unhappy worried maybe, he concedes.

Immediately, Hiccup sprawls across the black dragon's front paws, rolling onto his back and baring his throat beseechingly, twitching one back paw back and forth like an appealingly waving tail. And he smiles a dragon's smile up at Toothless, raising one paw to pet his nose.

Toothless growls " he knows what Hiccup is asking, and it's a bad idea.

But after today he cannot possibly refuse that smile. It's the grin that says they are going to get in trouble and they _both know it_ but it's going to be worth it! And it's one of Toothless' absolute favorite looks on Hiccup's face. They have had quite a lot of _fun_ with things that they have done in the wake of that smile, and as long as they are alive and together and it makes his beloved dragon-man happy! Hiccup is dragon enough to not build a nest in things he cannot change and chew on the sides, but what he is asking would leave him no time or attention for the things the _pfikingr_ she said to him.

So once they can fly properly again soon and before they go home!

They would hate to leave behind a mystery they have not investigated when they could fly a little further and do so. Of _course_ they dare to go and look and find out.

* * *

><p>To be continued.

****Related:**** ****Pyrophoricity**** recommends Adele's "Skyfall" (the theme for the Bond film of the same name) as a song for this story. After listening to it a dozen times or so yesterday (do like!) I have to agree; good call, Pyrophoricity, now I'll have to watch that movie. And ****Tithenannis**** gave me permission to send you to fanart at: <http://boobchicken.tumblr.com/post/91488712977>
tried-to-doodle-a-quick-nightfall-hiccup-man

ON WITH THE SHOW!

**Nightfall****, Part Fourteen**

When Astrid returns to the shore late the next morning, she does so with trepidation.

The moment she walks out into the open, she could die. She is almost expecting to, and somewhat believes that she will not get even that far, that the windblown sea pines will not hide her from those eyes and the smell of their rain-dampened needles will not keep Toothless from tracking her, and they will become the funeral pyre in which she will burn alive. Because of this, to her disgust, she is still standing in the forest just before the last slight bend in the increasingly worn path that will take her out of the trees and into view of the ocean and the rocky coastline that harbors her own personal nightmare: a challenge she cannot overcome and cannot understand and cannot leave alone.

And she wants to be done with this â€" at least, she does not want to be here this morning. She wishes that her honor and her sense of responsibility would let her stay away for one day, just one. A good part of her does not ever want to see those cold green eyes again, and she is not sure whether it is the dragon's eyes or the not-quite-human's she wants to see less.

But she knows she can't stay away. Yesterday had been awful.

The first dozen times someone had asked about the gash on her cheek, Astrid had answered simply, "I let down my guard around a dragon, and it got to me." She has outgrown the belief that every lesson should leave a scar, but this one will and she will not forget.

She had not even been going to ask Gothi to look at it, but she had stopped by the partly-demolished and never really repaired storehouse where the Elder had set up to care for some of the more severely wounded Vikings and the small woman had caught her in an unexpectedly firm hand, sat her down, and daubed something on it that stung worse than the original wound, gesturing and scowling the entire time. Astrid had been unable to stop herself thinking that it had been no different from the way the dragon-boy who had given the wound to her might behave if he was ever inclined to help her.

Besides, she has always suspected that Gothi makes that stuff for stupid people who have made stupid mistakes so that they will not make the same mistake again, and she was annoyed to have it put on her.

So to the next dozen curious people, she had gritted out, "I made a mistake." Surely that was not so unbelievable. She makes mistakes. She then fixes them, which some of the people she is responsible for have not yet learned to do. Every time she said it, she could not shake the feeling that she had just made a big one, and that she might not be able to fix it.

The last time someone had asked, she had yelled, "Go away and stop asking me that!"

To her relief, they had.

But it had gotten worse from there. It had gotten worse through the funerals for the dead when it started raining just to make the atmosphere of it worse, and every piece of debris she picked up, every wound she saw on her people, everyone who looked at her because they were looking for answers and she didn't have any to give them.

That night Astrid had brooded over her simple meal in the Great Hall along with everyone else, listening to the rain and already noticing that there was less food for the village than there was the day before. Certainly what they had was nowhere near the party they had thrown to celebrate the initial return of the fishing fleet, where she'd been forced to break up several fights mostly brought on by too much ale and because the chief was nowhere to be seen. Ultimately, she'd recruited some Vikings to just toss the brawlers out onto the steps up to the hall, deciding that if they were too drunk to fight on steps then they deserved to fall down them, which put a stop to most of the fighting quite quickly and gave the rest of the revelers some extra entertainment as they watched.

Seeing an armed cluster of Vikings setting out despite the rain to patrol the island, hunting for something fairly large that has been leaving tracks as it runs around hunting game but has not yet come near the village, had been a relief. But when she offered to go with them " an afternoon of obsessively sharpening and repairing her axe had given her a desire to test it out on something, and since it was probably some kind of dragon lurking out there, it was probably only a matter of time before it decided to come after the village as well " she found that they didn't want her help because they had too many people for an effective hunting party already. So she was left with nothing to do that was active enough to distract her from chewing over that confrontation with Hiccup and Toothless.

It grated on her all night as she tried to sleep and failed miserably, knowing that she owes her life to the whim of something not quite human. She could not stop thinking about the fight she had had with the dragon-boy. _Damn you! _she had cursed, unable to rest._ You can feel sympathy! You let me live, you spared my life! Why did you do that? If you can do that, why won't you help us?_

So despite her fears, despite the bruises on her stomach where Hiccup had pounced on her, she cannot face another night like that. It had been filled with anger and the sting of the wound on her cheek and the remembered fear of being pinned to the ground with a legendary monster and something even the storytellers couldn't have imagined threatening her together.

Astrid has never been one to turn her back on fear, and she faces failure like an enemy. She refuses to accept defeat and the worse it is the more she fights it. So she has come back.

It has occurred to her plenty of times on the way here that she is walking to her own death; she knows that Hiccup will not want to see her or speak to her, possibly ever again. He had told her to go. If she comes back " as she has done " she may not get a second chance.

But she has also realized that what she had considered a wake-up call had been, to him, a nightmare.

She almost feels guilty. She doesn't want to feel bad about telling him the truth, but she does. She's hurt him â€" she knew it would hurt him and she had told him anyway. She doesn't regret it â€" he needs to know â€" but she does not need to save her people by tormenting a child.

Yes, she knows he's as old as she is, but while Astrid thinks of herself as a woman she has trouble seeing the dragonish boy as a man. She has earned the right to call herself an adult, and as far as she's concerned he has yet to. He acts like a trapped animal, a child afraid of her; she cannot see him as an equal.

Hiccup infuriates and annoys her; he is incredibly disconcerting. But she doesn't hate him. Fear him, yes. He scares her. He's aggressive and dangerous when he needs to be and she knows it, she has the cuts and bruises to remind her. And he's an impossible mixture of two things that she had never imagined could or would coexist.

But on days when he's in a good mood and she's not pushing him too hard she also has to admit that there are good things about him too. He's very intelligent in a way he probably can't quite describe, but that he can certainly use. He doesn't talk very well by her standards, but he's observant. He has a sense of humor that she couldn't believe she was seeing when she figured out that he was doing things because they annoyed her and he was watching her react out of the corner of his eye. He draws better with a stick and some sand than anyone she knows can do with paper and ink. He's obviously a survivor â€" he does what he has to in order to keep himself and Toothless alive â€" and she has to respect that. He adores Toothless and the Night Fury adores him and Astrid is almost jealous of that. She wonders what it's like to have a dragon â€" to have anyone â€" love you so completely.

Astrid still can't believe that he spared her life, and oddly enough that is what has brought her back here most of all. She still thinks he could help her tribe; she insists on it and she's not going to leave him alone until he does.

And anyway, everyone knows that if you can find a crack in a dragon's armor that's where you should strike, and she had seen the look in his eyes before they had frozen over with hate â€" she had definitely gotten through to him. That he's capable of mercy! There is something human in there, and that human must be desperately confused right now. He must have so many questions.

Astrid needs to be the one with the answers. She has swung at him once and made contact, and now she needs to follow through with her strike. It's no different from fighting with an axe.

So she has to go back. She won't let him beat her. Her people need his help too badly for her to let him get away just because she'd forced him to face reality and he hadn't liked it.

When she rounds that last corner and leaves her knife in the woods, she closes her eyes for a brief second and takes a deep breath. In the next few moments she may be blasted to ashes or attacked by a furious dragon-boy, or ignored completely.

Accepting those possibilities, she steps out onto the shore. She

knows he sees more of what she feels than hears what she says; Astrid hopes he can see that she's sorry and doesn't want to fight right now, that she still wants to be friends.

It's quiet, is the first thing she notices. It's late in the morning and the sun is well up; the local seagulls have learned to avoid this area because she's seen Toothless eat them and while seagulls are very stupid they're not that stupid. The waves are rolling in and out as steadily as ever, but there is no black dragon splashing about in them fishing or half-hunched part-human figure drawing on the rain-wet beach with a stick or stalking something.

Of the various options, she's glad they're ignoring her.

Somewhat encouraged, Astrid goes to her usual flat rock and sits down to wait for one of them to emerge. She's brought food as an apology even though they can't spare it after yesterday morning's raid, and had gotten up early from a restless doze to get the people who like to cook to make something sweet from their limited reserves of honey as a bribe. It had taken some doing, but it'll be worth it. If he acts like a child, she's going to treat him as one, and start simply until he gets used to the idea and she can ask him to do more complicated things like send dragons away.

Almost an hour goes by before she admits to herself that they're really determinedly ignoring her today. Maybe they're still asleep. She wishes she could sleep in all day.

For a while she tries counting the waves as a way of timing how long it takes before they notice her, but that only puts her to sleep. When she jerks awake after her head slips sideways and collides painfully with a small rock outcropping, the sun has noticeably moved and her shadow tells her it's past noon.

No Toothless. No Hiccup. No tracks across the sand or scuffed-aside rocks to indicate that they have snuck past her while she slept. Now she hopes that they're ignoring her " falling asleep on watch! She's ashamed of herself.

This embarrassment drives her to do something that she has to admit is incredibly stupid even as she resolves to do it, because as she looks around for dragon and rider she focuses on the tumble of rocks that they use to get up and down from that inaccessible cave that they have been hiding in. Watching them do that does not get boring: it's a difficult climb and while she can understand why Toothless can do it " he's so much bigger and with a longer reach " she's constantly amazed at Hiccup's ability to do the same thing even without riding on the dragon's back. She couldn't climb that!

" could she?

Astrid must be mad. When she gets back to the village the chief is going to tie her to something and sail her away over the horizon like he threatens to do to the twins every so often. (Once, inspired by such a comment, the twins had tried to tie themselves to longboats, but no one actually wanted the twins for a figurehead. The ship's captain had left them there to untangle themselves, though, and there had been a few hours of relative peace in the village.)

Here and now, though, the more she looks at that slope the more she imagines that they have started to wear it away, that their repeated ascents and descents have moved stones enough to make it almost climbable by someone really determined.

She can't believe she's considering deliberately climbing into a dragon's den, especially one she knows is full of dragon that is probably very upset with her. Better to admit that Hiccup doesn't want anything to do with her today and go home until he's in a better mood. It's a ridiculous risk.

But her tribe specializes in crazy, although it's probably a good thing that there isn't a contest for craziest clan in the Archipelago. And leaving now would mean admitting defeat, suggesting that she's going to let him keep on ignoring the people here who need his help, and she refuses to back down. She is now convinced that her fate is to die by Night Fury. It will happen. It may as well happen today, and she would rather face it than wait for it to chase her down.

Crossing the beach cautiously, Astrid calls out, "Hiccup? Toothless? It's me! It's Astrid! It's all right! Are you there? I'm coming up!"

Nothing but waves, so Astrid eyes the route she thinks she can see and sheds her armor despite strongly wanting to keep it on. It won't actually protect her from that blast of flame Toothless fires anyway, but she feels a lot more vulnerable without it. Still, it won't do her any good if she can't get up there to begin with. Astrid spits on her hands, says a rueful prayer, and climbs.

It's hard work, and before she's halfway up Astrid has realized two things.

One, Hiccup is stronger than he looks. She knew that already from fighting with him, but it's brought home to her all over again as she struggles. He's bigger than her and his reach is correspondingly wider but he must also be heavier and she has to use all her hard-earned warrior strength to pull herself from rock to rock.

Two, this cliff is really bloody high.

After her first thoughtless glance down, Astrid resolves to never do that again. She was born on this cliff-edged island and has never been afraid of heights " some of the ramps built into Berk's cliffs overlook fatal falls " but then those were built deliberately and checked often and they are not improvised out of rocks that must have been unstable to fall in the first place and then shift. She does not want to think about how she's going to get down again, assuming she doesn't do so as a blazing cinder.

Oh, and three, she amends her own mental tally: this was a really bad idea. At a truly inconvenient point where she thinks a single breath of wind might force her to lose her grip and a sneeze would definitely kill her " there is rock dust in her nose and throat and it is a genuine possibility " she remembers that this was a climb the twins thought was crazy.

When the twins think something is crazy, and Snotlout backs them up, it's probably unspeakably crazy.

But ironically enough, she's really gone too far to stop now, which seems to be her lot in life every time she steps out onto this beach. Astrid is going to stop praying before she does dangerous things: it seems to attract the attention of trickster gods who think they're funnier than they are.

She sticks to it, though. She refuses to give up. Astrid never gives up, and she almost never backs down. Not with her people's lives and her own honor at stake.

Getting to the top is one of the greatest reliefs of her life. She drags herself over the edge onto that lip of rock outside it and for a moment doesn't care enough to get up off the ground, even if Toothless is standing over her with his fangs bared ready to roast her and then eat her.

No lightning scream greets her, no howl of nearly-human rage challenges her. So Astrid sits up, shakes out her arms, and looks around.

It had not looked this high from the ground, but some of the drop that she hadn't dared to look at is over the ocean and that means the end of a potential fall is not only far away but moving. It's disorienting.

But she can see clearly into the cave " it's really only a depression in the rock like someone had pushed their hand into the stone and scooped out a handful. It's not very large and there are no passageways leading deeper into the cliff.

And it's empty.

No dragon. No dragon-boy.

Tentatively, Astrid thinks better of getting to her feet and instead crawls over to the cave. This turns out to be a good decision as she feels less like she's going to fall and she would have had to crouch down anyway just a bit to get through the cave mouth. Though it's higher inside she stands up gingerly, and it still barely clears her head in most places. She can smell dragon, that unique lizard-like scent combined with fire and the smell of something exploding and salty sea air. Most of the sand has been swept around the stone floor in strange whorls and tracks, across stone that is fairly regular and even, although there are scratches from dragon-claws across some of them, especially around the cave mouth.

Her eyes are drawn to a space where the rock has worn away unevenly to create a low, flat alcove between a ridge of stone and the back wall. There is no sand there; no fish scales or bones, no bits of thread or half-burnt sticks, and no scattered scraps of paper so thickly covered in charcoal drawings that they are almost burnt-black and wholly indecipherable, all of which can be found elsewhere in the cave.

The light from the afternoon sun highlights those rock walls, which are covered with deliberate marks in chalk and charcoal.

"You draw on the walls," Astrid says to the absent Hiccup. "This is Toothless." She's familiar with the way he draws the dragon, which he

does frequently, and it is usually accompanied by his own dragon-like figure, which is "aha! "And here you are. I don't know what this means, but it's scary. Or scared. This is" she squints at it, and guesses, "a wing? Toothless' wing?"

One finger traces the design without touching it, and then moves on to some similar drawings beneath it. "As it heals" The rest make no sense to her whatsoever, and some of them are smeared or half-washed away.

It all adds up to one thing, and Astrid cannot help but admit it.

"You're gone." Her voice sounds like she's announcing a death " she may as well be " as it echoes in the abandoned cave.

They can't be gone! She still needs Hiccup's help, there are still dragons trying to starve her people out and it's getting worse! They can't be gone, Toothless shouldn't be able to fly yet!

Except she knows nothing about how quickly dragons can heal, and a memory has been nagging at the back of her mind ever since she woke up from her unexpected nap and seen that the beach was still deserted.

After a moment, it occurs to her " she'd been focused on Hiccup, jammed against the rock and trying to get away from her, as they fought, but she had seen Toothless threaten her " wings spread wide.

They had not looked broken, and she had not consciously noticed at the time.

"No" says Astrid to no one at all, furious and disoriented and impressed somewhat against her will. "You sneaky little"

She has failed utterly.

They have gotten away, and she cannot imagine that they will ever come back.

* * *

><p>She doesn't remember getting back down. She only knows she's accomplished it when her feet don't hit more rocks and she has to look down to realize that there is wet sand on her boots.<p>

Astrid is numb to the fact that she has not fallen and that she never has to do that again. If she had fallen she would not have to think about being tricked by dragons and she would not have to go back and confess to the chief that she has failed in the responsibility that he has given her. The boy who was once the chief's son has vanished and they have almost no chance of ever finding him again.

Then, just briefly, something occurs to her. Those tracks. The ones that the oversized hunting party was trying to follow last night.

Toothless?

If Astrid can follow a path and leave this shoreline, Toothless definitely can. Just because this is the only place she has ever seen them does not mean that this is the only place they have ever been. They might just have moved to somewhere else on Berk, somewhere she doesn't know and where she might not follow them.

She hopes that's the case. It will be difficult to find them again â€" they will probably be actively hiding from her â€" but she might be able to salvage something from this shipwreck.

But that memory of Toothless spreading his wings will not leave her alone, and somehow she doubts that they are still on Berk.

There is no one to see her, and her legs are still wobbling from that climb, so Astrid sits down alone on the shoreline and puts her head in her hands, cursing herself and clever dragons.

Now what?

And what is she going to tell Stoick?

Imagining this so consumes her attention that it is several minutes before she looks up again, and when she does it is to somewhat of a spectacle.

The beach is full of little dragons.

Terrible Terrors are fluttering about with their noses to the ground and sniffing the air, following each other around on rocks and across scrubby grass, making little flights over the water and back again. But it's completely different from what she has observed is their normal mode of behavior â€" when they're not attacking humans or small and edible creatures like fish or squirrels, they're actually quite playful, which is something The Book of Dragons definitely doesn't say. She must remember to tell Fishlegs before Stoick exiles her so he can write it down and she will have achieved something, however small, to help them deal with dragons.

They love playing with Hiccup and teasing Toothless even though the Night Fury is so much bigger than they are. They have interrupted just about all of the language lessons she has been trying to teach Hiccup over these last few weeks, and he never hesitates to abandon whatever she's trying to do in favor of playing with them.

As she watches, something of a halfhearted scuffle erupts among the densest cluster of Terrors, and the loser â€" or maybe the winner, it's hard to tell with Terrors â€" takes off into the air away from the group and up towards the sea cave that Astrid has just returned from. With the advantage of flight it makes the ascent much more quickly and easily and the Viking woman is briefly jealous. She can see it hovering there, circling and bobbing up and down in the air, a little speck of color against the rocks and the sky.

When it returns with somewhat of a crash it sits down and whimpers unhappily, head drooping. Within seconds the sentiment has spread throughout the flock and dejected little dragons are everywhere, wings hunched over backs or trailing on the ground, eyes big and sad, and tails tucked up under or close in to bodies.

"You miss your friends," says Astrid â€" it's fairly obvious. "Sorry,

little guys. They're really gone."

Sad Terrors whimper and whine and complain that their friends are not here to play with, shuffling around as if they will find Hiccup or Toothless in a tide pool or under a rock. She knows how they feel, and completely overlooks the fact that she is now able to empathize with dragons.

Astrid doesn't feel threatened by them, so she puts her chin in her hands and stares out to sea, not worried about being attacked by little dragons that look like they have been left out in the rain.

She sighs, no closer to knowing what she is going to do next despite the distraction of the Terrors arriving and discovering what she had already known – the Night Fury and his dragonish rider have disappeared. If they were still on the island the Terrors would probably have been able to track them, but they are making no effort to do so.

After a few minutes, she looks around and discovers that just as she's not threatened by the Terrors, the Terrors must have gotten used to her, because there is one lying right by her left knee with its shoulders hunched, staring at the horizon longingly.

The Viking woman stares at it. It's small and sad and not at all scary.

It stares back at her and they look at each other for a very long moment. She understands that it's sad and, she thinks, it understands that she is sad. And they are sad for the same reason.

The Terror rolls its eyes up at her and shuffles its oversized head closer to her, making small unhappy noises to match its small unhappy look.

Very, very carefully, and very, very slowly, Astrid raises a hand and reaches out. She can't believe she's doing this.

She pets its head carefully, ready to snatch her hand away if this is a trap and it has decided to eat fingers rather than fish today.

She'd been right. Dragons are warm.

The Terror purrs with the faintest suggestion of a catch in its voice as if it feels a little bit better and less lonely, and crawls up to her to prop its head on her knee – she couldn't move if she wanted to, this is too weird! – so she can pet it better.

It chirps at her when she stops, just like Hiccup when he's happy, so she keeps petting it, getting more comfortable with the action. Having faced down Toothless, it's so small.

A warble from behind her makes Astrid look over her shoulder. Two more Terrors have dared to come up to her and are looking at her pitifully.

Choking back a hysterical laugh, Astrid reaches out her free hand and wiggles her fingers slightly, beckoning even though she is still

half-sure they are going to get bitten off.

They manage to both rub against her hand at once.

A few minutes later Astrid has Terrors swarming around her peeping for attention and sympathy and she has not gotten bitten or flamed at even though she can't pet them all at once and although they are fighting each other for access to her one minute and staring wistfully out to sea after Hiccup and Toothless the next. Neither has she jumped up and run away screaming or particularly wanted to hit them with the nearest thing she can find. There are two in her lap and one perched on her knee and she has successfully taught one particularly inquisitive one not to chew on her braid.

She can't believe it. She has alienated and then lost both a human who can speak to and control dragons and the most dangerous dragon ever discovered or even rumored by all Vikings. She has failed to get Hiccup to send away the dragons that plague them before he can escape from her. But she seems to have acquired a flock of pet Terrors.

If she has to start over, maybe she'll have to start small.

If Stoick doesn't just cast her out of the tribe for losing his son.

* * *

><p>Stoick the Vast is tired of waiting. All he ever does is wait, wait for the dragons to come back and for the fishing fleet to return, for winter to come and his people to die, for Astrid to befriend the boy who should have been his son if dragons hadn't flayed all the humanity away from him and for her to teach him to talk just so he could tell Stoick things he never wanted to hear. He has waited twenty years and his reward for his patience and faith has been a snarling, hating creature that is all that is left of his only child and the knowledge that he would never see his beloved Valka again. He has held off and brooded and kept his rage locked up but this latest attack is too much. He has to do something, even if it's a desperate attempt that has never worked in the past.<p>

Still, Vikings are persistent and stubborn, and you can break rocks by beating your head against them. Even if it hurts, it works in the end. What else can he do but what he knows?

"We're going after those dragons," he booms as night closes in around the Great Hall again. It is probably too soon for another dragon raid but he has posted watches anyway "they're coming faster and faster and maybe one day they will never stop. Most of the rest of the village is crowded in here and between all the people and the fires lit against the darkness and the tension in the room it's as warm in the hall as it ever gets. "I want the ships seaworthy and loaded for war. It's past time we started raiding them again rather than sitting around and waiting for them to raid us!"

As he'd expected, this announcement evokes a mixed chorus of cheers from angry people and groans from those who have been on these raids in the past and noncommittal mutters from people who think he's wrong but are not sure enough about it to say so to his face.

"All the ships?" a longboat's captain says, spreading his hands to

indicate that he's being reasonable, not arguing with the chief.
"Some of us should go out fishing again."

"Why?" Spitelout shouts at him across the table. "They'll just come for it again! Why should we work to feed a bottomless pit of dragons?"

"Because even what we can keep is better than nothing!" the captain yells back, all indications of reasonableness going away as he squares off to fight. "We can't eat dragons!"

This is true; in the depths of devastating winter Vikings have tried in the past and regretted it. Dragons, it is now generally agreed, are inedible.

"Fight first! Fish later!"

This is taken up as a ragged chorus by the people looking for a fight where they're the attackers rather than the attacked. Any moment now punches will be thrown and they'll be attacking each other.

Astrid, who is half-sitting on the table because she's surrounded by huge Vikings, rolls her eyes. She's been very quiet throughout the whole clan meeting, and in fact all day, pacing back and forth until called on by someone to do something or resolve some quarrel, staring at the ground as if it has done something to offend her. Stoick has said nothing to her, of course â€" whatever it is that's worrying her, and she has plenty to worry over, she'll solve it. If she wants his help, she'll ask.

"Quiet!" Stoick roars. "Not all the ships. I'll keep back a small fishing fleet, but I want the rest of them ready to sail. We're going to find the nest this time! Astrid!"

Her head jerks up as if she's surprised to be consulted. "Yes, chief?"

"Find out from â€" He can't say it. He desperately wants to acknowledge the dragon-boy as his son and insist on bringing him back to the village and teaching him to be human again, but he is also repulsed by the monster he sees with his son's face that screams with a dragon's voice. It is so very far from what he dreamed his only son would be that he cannot accept it and can barely even think about it. "Can you find out if the dragon rider knows where the nest is? They always fly away in the same direction, so we'll start there, but if he can lead us to the nestâ€"|"

She looks uncomfortable. "I don't think I can do that, Chief. I'd try, but â€" "

"Do better than try. You've had almost a month. Make him understand," Stoick snaps, cutting off whatever she was about to say next. She goes white with rage at the curt interruption, making that cut on her face stand out in sharp and angry contrast, but holds her tongue.

"What if we separate the rider from the dragon?" He knows he'd discouraged that very same suggestion weeks ago but now he's desperate, grieving, and angry. He's seen how attached the boy who was once his son is to that Night Fury, and if nothing but force will

get Hiccup away from the creature and back to humanity then that's what he'll use. What right does a dragon have to him over the boy's own father? "If we brought him with us, could he show us where the nest is?"

"Chief, I think we really need to talkâ€|" she says almost uncertainly, lifting her chin in what Stoick recognizes as Astrid trying to maintain her dignity when she's embarrassed. The woman has more pride than a longboat full of Vikings.

"Fine. Not now."

"Chief," someone else protests, "every time we've tried to go after them we either wander around in circles out on the open ocean or dragons wreck the ships. We've lost entire ships and everyone aboard, never to be seen again!"

"And this time we'll have a guide," he snaps back at her. "This time they won't be expecting it, because they'll think we've learned, that we're just going to keep feeding them and lie down and die. I'm not going to do that! I'm going to fight! We have to strike back!"

The argument goes on in this vein for a while, part of the room wanting to load up and ship out immediately and some arguing for a more cautious approach like what they've been doing for years: stock up on food and weapons, use both, keep a close watch on the skies, and fend off anything that come raiding until the dragons get the message. Neither strategy has worked particularly well in the past, so Stoick is currently favoring the one that lets him go out there and do something and maybe stop thinking and remembering for a little while, and it's not open to debate, although this never stops Vikings if there's a chance to argue.

But his resolve must be obvious, even if it's the cold determination of a man who has seen his own horrors and will see them again for the rest of his life no matter what he does, because there's reluctance but no significant resistance, and the chief spends the rest of the evening sorting out who is going to stay here, who is going to go out fishing and hunting, and who's coming to war with him. It's quite possible that Berk will be attacked in his absence, so he plans to leave several of his best warriors with Astrid in command. One of the reasons they had stopped launching retaliatory raids like this, besides the fact that they had never found the nest the dragons were coming from, was that at one point the dragons had apparently figured out that if there were lots of ships full of Vikings floating around on the ocean, that meant that there weren't as many Vikings defending the island.

Stoick often wishes that dragons were a lot stupider.

But when he's fighting he doesn't have to think; when he's killing dragons he doesn't have to feel anything, even physical pain, except triumph. He doesn't have to feel the grief of Valka's death, confirmed so late and so harshly; he doesn't have to consider that every blow he strikes is a blow his son would hate him for because the creatures have made him into a monster like them. He can't feel regret that the differences between them are so wide and irreconcilable. He can forget the dreams he's been having of tearing the boy away from the dragon and those claws from his hands and just holding on to him as if he were a baby again until he remembers

that he is a person, not an animal, that he is Stoick's son and even though Hiccup is afraid of him the chief cannot stop loving him just for being his and Valka's child.

He wants his son back and the dragons gone and the two wishes have become inextricably linked. If he can drive the dragons away the boy will come back to him; if he can show Hiccup that he was born a Viking and he is wanted here then he will send the dragons away. He will be human again and not a snarling creature no different " no better " than any dragon.

He can do this. He will do it. He will pound his head against the problem until it cracks in two, with the dragons on one side and his son on the other, never to be tangled up again.

So he spends most of the evening readying his people for war and it's fairly late and long since dark before he has time to talk to Astrid beyond sending her off to help organize the preparations.

She finds him as he sits down for a moment on the top of one of the large watch platforms that the dragons haven't managed to burn down just yet. There's a fire lit but he's not looking at it because it will ruin his night vision to do so: he's staring out to sea and wishing that if he looked hard enough he could see his memories like a real place and see Valka while she was still alive and with him and Hiccup while he was still a boy and not whatever he is now.

"Chief?" says Astrid, climbing to the platform. "Can I talk to you?"

The chief waves her up with one big hand. "What's going on, Astrid?" This had better be good; he needs her at top form right now.

The young woman whom he has chosen as his heir sits down on the floor of the platform and can't meet his eyes when he looks at her. She takes a deep breath and clenches her fists and Stoick goes cold, knowing he will not like what she is about to say.

"I told Hiccup that he's human," Astrid says to the fire.

"Did he understand you?"

"Yes."

"What did he do?"

She points wordlessly to the gash under her left eye.

"Ah. So you can't get him to tell you where the nest is because he's angry at you."

"No, sir, I can't ask him anything. He's gone." She says it with the teeth-clenching determination of someone who is walking off a cliff with her eyes shut, knowing she's going to fall but unable to stop and unable to watch.

Stoick hears his voice go very cold. "Gone? What do you mean, gone?"

"The only thing keeping them here " sorry, chief, Hiccup really

doesn't like Vikings " was that Toothless' wing was broken. But yesterday I saw him spread those wings and they didn't look broken to me. I even climbed up to their cave this afternoon and looked for them. I don't know where they've gone. They might still be on Berk, but I doubt it, I think they've flown away. The Terrible Terrors like playing with them and the Terrors were acting like they were gone. But I realized something," she says quickly.

Stoick lets her talk. It gives him more time to build up to what he wants to say and figure out what he's feeling.

"They got used to me, the Terrors; they'll even let me pet them. Dragons can be trained, Chief, and I didn't even have to learn how to talk like a dragon! I want to try working with the ones we've got in the fighting pit. Maybe we can use dragons against the dragons " they're territorial, if I could train our captive ones to think that Berk is theirs maybe they'd fight the others for us! We could feed a couple of tame dragons rather than a whole nest full of wild ones!" She sounds more and more excited as she elaborates and he says nothing.

But Stoick is silent because he is too angry to speak, a condition previously only experienced a handful of times by the Viking chieftain whose skills include being louder and more authoritative than anyone else who tries to argue with him.

"You lost him?"_ he roars finally, cutting her off mid-sentence.

He had not even been hearing what she was saying at that point, all of it lost beneath rage like a storm beating around his ears and tearing into his head to dive down into his gut and pound against the inside of his ribs. His son is gone again, the son he had a chance of getting back, taken away right out of Stoick's hands for the second time by a dragon. But the Night Fury was wounded; it can't have gone far

Only slightly more quietly, he asks coldly, "You chased him away?" It cannot be a coincidence that she had angered him and the dragon-boy had then vanished. It is her fault, she scared him off.

She tries to deny it or tries to apologize, he doesn't hear, doesn't know, doesn't care. Stoick suffered the loss of a child once, but he will not let it happen again. This time, he is going to go after the one he's lost and get him back, no matter how long it takes or what he has to do to accomplish that.

"Get out of my sight," he tells Astrid curtly " she takes one step back, shocked and shamed, but then locks her heels and refuses to let it show on her face. "Keep the island from burning down to the waterline while I'm gone and I'll consider that when I deal with you later."

Right now he is going to march down to the ship he was going to command anyway and get it ready to launch by the turn of the next tide if he has to push it out of the dock himself.

Let the others go and find the nest. Stoick doesn't care about that anymore. There have been other raids in the past and there will always be more dragons to fight.

Stoick is going to find his son.

* * *

><p>To be continued.

15. Chapter 15

ON WITH THE SHOW!

****Related:**** Previously on Nightfall, Astrid covered in Terrible Terrors, courtesy of ****drive-by anon ****over on AO3, at: <http://i.imgur.com/Q3pf1sL.png>. I recommend looking at the art before reading this chapter so you can get your giggles in properlyâ€|

****Nightfall**_**, Part Fifteen****

Pfikingr are loud.

For many days now the two-who-are-one have been flying from island to island, testing their healing wings and trying to find one where the humans will not go. They stayed too long in one place and the sickbadwrongthing that might be this flock's Alpha had found them and tried to steal them, so they will wander, but now pfikingr are everywhere, making noise and chasing dragons and shadows and sometimes each other, which was funny to watch from safely up in the air where the humans did not see the dragon-pair because they were too busy hunting each other.

One small island is still on fire, smoldering until the rains or the snows come back again.

It does not matter, the doings of pfikingr are no longer their problem. Now they are curious about things that properly belong to dragons. From his current perch on a broad and craggy rock ledge high above the ocean where no human could ever climb, Hiccup is content to rest his head on his paws and watch the ships in the distance. The water below carries some of the sound of it to him, and he listens to them curiously but unafraid. The humans are too far away â€" he could hide both of the ships behind one paw if he stretched it out â€" and they do not know that the dragon-pair is here. In their black scales they blend into the weather-darkened stone and they are waiting patiently and still.

Hiccup and Toothless are hiding not from pfikingr but from dragons. They are looking for the nest of this flock and nests are hidden safe places, they will not find it by looking. They will find it by hunting.

Behind him, Toothless stretches out a wing luxuriously, scratching his back against the stone and enjoying the feeling of muscles well used. They have been flying this afternoon, and having the full use of his wings back is making the black dragon purr happy flying good good good stre-e-e-e-tch good flying happy fast happy.

Turning his back on the distant ships, Hiccup climbs down from his perch and onto the larger flat rock hidden behind the outcropping, running a soft paw across the healed wing, investigating just to be

sure. If Toothless believes he is healed then Hiccup trusts him implicitly and completely, but he wants to know, they are his wings too. The scars he can feel under his cheek when he turns his face to rub against the wing will probably never fade, but they will not make flying any more difficult and they will remind them not to underestimate humans in future. The bones are solid " they have been able to hunt much better here when they do not have to hide from _pfikingr_ and now that they can fly again.

Yes yes good yes flying us flying good you good flying, he hums, smiling a dragon's smile at Toothless and settling himself by the bigger dragon's side, rolling onto his back and stretching out his own wings on the sun-warm stone, heedless of the lethal drop only paces away.

They are well. The nightmare of _trapped_ and besieged and hunted is behind them. They are _free_ again, free to fly like no one else, together and faster than anyone in their flock and fearless because they can outfly anything and because they are together.

They fly as if dancing, as if they will never have to come down again, as if all the world is sky and all the horizons are catchable like prey that is just fast enough that it is fun to chase but that they know they will catch because they are _faster_.

They could go home but now they have a curious thing that they want to find out about and that they are not afraid of because they are together and they are free. If it did not want to be investigated, it should not hang its tail from a tree branch so temptingly. Hiccup and Toothless simply cannot resist pulling tails.

The man who is a dragon sighs with pure delight. He could close his eyes to imagine flying better but he prefers the look in his dragon-love's expressive eyes and the grin that Toothless returns to him, dropping his nose to touch the purr in Hiccup's throat and match it.

Hunting? Toothless whistles, raising his head and looking inquisitively out to sea.

Hiccup squawks an irritated noise. _Human ships calling human wait-to-pounce_, this last a hunting signal the pair uses. No dragon would fly right now, including them.

The bigger dragon huffs, not thinking much of the intelligence of the dragons here.

His companion laughs, understanding immediately and reaching out a paw to wrap around as much of Toothless' closest one as his paw can hold. _Wait-to-pounce_, he whistles again, urging patience.

And when Toothless gives him a mocking look - _you wait-to-pounce you reckless you?_ " he only laughs again and closes his eyes against the sun that is warm on them.

They are together, they are _free_. It is indescribably good.

* * *

><p>The sun is almost down when Toothless sees another dragon in the

distance, moving as if it is carrying a kill. He stares, interested, crouching down as if he could pounce on it from here, while at the same time sweeping his tail around to pull his Hiccup-beloved to him.

Hunting up up go now, the bigger dragon whistles, feeling his partner leap to his shoulders almost immediately, setting himself for flight. With his body he tells Toothless that he is ready to go and eager to, chattering _want want want_ sounds interspersed with _flying happy flying us go us hunt flying good yes_.

That it is getting dark does not bother them; Toothless can see better in the dark than any other dragon, even in the darkest cave, and Hiccup is used to the night.

When they take off they do so silently; they are good hunters and they do not need sounds to speak to each other like _pfikingr_.

Toothless glances over his shoulder briefly and indicates _you watch_. When Hiccup crouches down and fixes his eyes on the low-flying two-heads cousin/s that they are steadily gaining on, the black dragon changes direction, angling them up and towards the clouds, where the air is thinner and a dragon carrying prey would not go or look. He takes into account the wind that could blow their scent to the dragon they are stalking and where their shadow will fall as the sun goes away, finding just the right approach through experience and practice and aided by Hiccup's signals as he tracks the two-heads cousin/s.

The clouds bat around them like waves but they are used to that, they love to fly high. They dive through clouds that cannot be pounced on and chewed on and that disappear when they get too close, and they spin until they do not know which way they will be facing when they come out of them. Once Cloudjumper had caught them playing at this game when the clouds were so low to the water that they were in danger of hitting the ocean " if they were not as good at it as they were.

But it was a good game and they had gotten Cloudjumper to play as well and they did not get scolded.

Now they are using the clouds to hide themselves, to cast no shadow when possible and a faint and broken one when the leaving sun catches them.

The light is almost gone when Hiccup taps his paws in a puzzled way on the back of Toothless' head and points.

There is a cloud on the water that goes on a very long way, and they are following the two-heads cousin/s towards it.

Toothless slows and hovers briefly. He does not like it, and he can feel that Hiccup does not like it either.

A paw wrapped around his shoulder gives them both courage, and they dive down to almost skim the waves, following their lead to the thing that makes dragons walk in their sleep and scream in fear. They are unhappy with the _sickbadwrongthing_ and want to growl at it.

* * *

><p>Hiccup deeply and truly dislikes this place; it sets his teeth on edge ready to snap and he thinks he might soon hate it more than the shoreline they had been trapped on. The fog makes sounds in his ears sound strange and it makes the sounds in his mind sound strange too. It is too thick, and too still. Fog moves. This does not.

But they keep going. They must know what is going on here, and that means finding the nest and tracking the sickbadwrongthing to its lair, if they are right, but Hiccup believes they are. And then they will leave and not come back, but it would itch to have a mystery at their tail, and then it might come after them. They should scream at it first so it will not chase them anymore.

The fog smells of still air, of seawater, and of blood from the kill in the claws of the two-heads cousin/s, but it is a lot of blood. Hiccup raises his head and watches for other dragons. Maybe there are more hunters. But in this fog " it tricks his eyes and it tricks his ears and drowns his nose.

Toothless flies more slowly, banking away from another sea stack. There are so many of them, like fangs in the mouth of the biggest dragon of them all, like a nest of the biggest dragons of them all, all hungry, all gaping in the darkness made darker by the fog and ready to strike down exploring dragon-pairs.

How can anything fly in this maze? Hiccup longs for the open sky, looking up as much to search for the night sky as to keep a lookout for other dragons. In the night, he searches not for scales but for eyes.

Communicating to each other almost exclusively through touch, both dragons shudder together as if they were cold, sending each other their nervousness and trading back equal reassurance.

The wrong fog makes their wingbeats loud, and they must fly so slowly to stay quiet that they are almost hovering. Hiccup glances down at the ocean below them and it is too close. Up! he urges Toothless, tapping his back paws against the dragon's sides and clenching his front ones on the back of the black dragon's neck.

Toothless surges away from the waves that are trying to pull him down with their cold claws and cannot avoid another sea fang. Scrabbling for a grip, he sets his claws into it and digs with his back feet for purchase until they are hanging from the side of the stone.

It is not a good place. The rock is weak in the fog and it crumbles beneath the dragon's paws, falling to the water below and making splashes that sound too loud. He keeps having to move them to new footholds and beat his wings to keep their balance.

All but silently, Toothless rumbles deep in his chest, worried stalking bad worried careful.

Hiccup purrs agreement, but it is not a happy sound and comes out closer to a growl. They are hunters, but they are being hunted, and he wants to turn and fight the thing that stalks them.

The black dragon signals _up_ again but does not take off. Instead, he scrambles up the rock until he reaches a ledge that does not threaten to break beneath their weight just yet. There he crouches and growls deep in his throat, setting their tail to the stone and preparing to defend.

But nothing comes for them as it becomes truly dark in the depths of the still fog, and they have lost the cousin/s that they were stalking.

The dragon-man whimpers a soft question, uncertain, as he looks around and down and up. He does not know where they are, where the open air is, and it unsettles him.

Toothless twists his head around to look at his companion and chirps reassurance, the sound familiar and welcome and strange in this dead air. He flips his nose straight up and purrs and chirps _flying good safe good flying us up up up up_.

It is a good idea, and Hiccup relaxes slightly. If they must, they will fly straight up and the fog will not follow them all the way, because they will go as high as it takes until they can turn and fight clearly. This is not a maneuver that most dragons do naturally, because it is so easy to overbalance and fall backwards where it is hard to get wings and bodies twisted around to fly right again, but it is useful, and Hiccup and Toothless dare to because they are _good_ at that trick. The black dragon is built for agility, and his companion has been raised on flight and freefall since a very early age.

Guard, Hiccup suggests, raising his jaw and assuming the pose of a dragon on the defense of its nest, head up and protective. He glances around at the fog and slips his claws on to slash at it where it winds towards them. His claws go straight through as he knows they will â€" dragons cannot fight fog â€" but it makes him feel better. _Bad bad this nest guard._

Toothless hums thoughtfully. It is possible. Their own nest is protected by ice, so it is not too different an idea that this one might be defended by fog. He rolls an eye back to look at Hiccup, who catches the glance and sets his shoulders, nodding fiercely and growling deep in his throat.

Yes, they will go on; they are together so they are not afraid.

They wait, stalking again, scenting the still air for the smell of dragon or the smell of kill, listening for the sound of wings.

This-way go ready flying, Toothless suggests finally, tensing for a takeoff and angling his body towards the direction he means to go.

Hiccup whistles a very quiet question. _Why?_

His dragon-half does not answer, but leaps into the air with a strong downbeat that propels them through the fog, swerving to miss another sea fang that Hiccup could not even see coming.

But Toothless sees better in the dark than he does, so the dragon-man

trusts his beloved to lead them even though he does not know why the dragon has chosen this direction. There is nothing of uncertainty in Toothless' movements that he can feel so clearly where they are pressed together as they fly, and his breathing is steady except when he gulps in the air as if he is following a clear scent.

After a moment, though, he sees a shadow in the distance that is the stocky shape of a rock-skin cousin, small wings beating furiously and setting up vibrations in the still air that Hiccup can feel now that they are closer. And there is a faint scent of prey-blood beneath the seawater-smell in the air. Pleased, he settles down again.

As they track the new dragon, though, Hiccup cannot stay calm for long. His shoulders itch and his spine wants to curl a tail in as if it were about to get pounced on, and not by a hatchling, by something big. He looks everywhere for eyes but there are no eyes except Toothless' barely visible as faint green against the night-black of his scales, and Toothless is not watching him, Toothless is hunting, and being watched by Toothless is a good thing and does not feel anything like this!

He looks around them and knows something is wrong. Something here is not right in the endless fog and he cannot see what it is. Irritated, he shakes his head like there are bugs in his ears, pawing at one of them with the side of his dragon-claws so as to not cut his own skin. He will save his claws for the enemy that is biting at him.

The sounds, there is something wrong with the soundsâ€¦

It takes a few more minutes for Hiccup to figure it out, as they fly and stalk, but when he does he is afraid.

There are waves washing around the sea fangs, beating against the rock to eat them away, but either his eyes or his ears are lying to him, because they do not make noise at the right time. He can hear waves, but they are the wrong waves. They are not these waves that he can see clearly with his well-trained night vision.

The dragon-man sets his back paws against Toothless' shoulders and pulls hard on the flying-with, reluctant to make an alarm sound and interrupt their hunt again, but disturbed by the impossible thing. He shakes his head harder as he does so, trying to make whichever one of them is wrong right again, like he has woken up from a dream that will not go away and its shadow is in his eyes even when the sun is too.

Toothless pulls up short, tail flipping under him to balance and then hovering, at the distress he can smell and feel, but by then the waves are right again.

Hiccup shudders, a full-body movement that transfers to the dragon and shakes its way all the way out to Toothless' tailfins.

Threat? Toothless growls quietly, looking around and sniffing the air.

He risks another look. The waves are waves and they sound like waves. He croons uncertainty to Toothless and the dragon purrs comfort and together.

Smell, he suggests, lifting his nose and following his own advice.
Nest hunt track nest dragons hunting.

Hiccup whistles a soft question. The sound carries in the dead air.

Hunt prey kill hunt dragons dragons fear dragons nest flock many prey fear prey hunt fear, it smells like, Toothless mutters. _Nest no nest;_ and he places the emphasis on _nest_ that makes it _their_ nest, their home, which is safe and hidden and a sanctuary where they are happy with their family.

Reaching out a paw, Hiccup strokes it down Toothless' head from as far as he can reach to the flying-with, comforting them both.
Curious? he chirps.

Yes yes yes. Toothless shifts away from hovering and sets off again, following the scent.

Finally the fog clears as they approach an island that is bigger than any sea fang; it is a mountain, with crags to climb and rocks to sun on and to protect the nest. And there is _sky_ overhead! The stars are bright and familiar and welcome, the growing moon a friend to wandering dragons.

There are many rocks that have fallen and tumbled from high places to lower ones " rocks do that, sometimes they do that all at once and that has happened here. Some are darker and older than others and some are broken new and sharp for dragons to cut their paws on until they have been worn down by scales or more rocks dropped on them on purpose. Rocks are not friendly to rocks, they fight like dragons.

Dragon and rider alight gently on the rough shore that surrounds it, looking the mountain island over. As soon as he lands, Toothless raises a paw curiously, amazed. The ground beneath his feet is warm. He hums with pleasure " dragons have fires in them, but they adore warm things. Warm things belong to them because they are distant kin. The fog is worrying, but if the nest is warm even in the ground then he is not surprised that the flock has made their nest here. It would be good to have warm ground for a nest.

They are hidden by the darkness, but they can see and hear other dragons crying out to each other, they can smell the familiar scent of a dragon-nest " different from theirs, but so many dragons in one place can only mean a nest. And if there is a nest, there must be a leader, and either it _is_ the _sickbadwrongthing_ or it will know what it is, because what leader of dragons would not know its territory? _Their_ Alpha does.

They have lived all their lives under the rule of a good king, and have never known another.

There is always a way into a nest, and confidently, Hiccup and Toothless take off again, examining the island from the air. There are many dragons to follow now, but they stay out of sight as much as possible because they are strangers and nests are defended because nests contain eggs. They are invisible in the night.

Hiccup leans to one side to catch Toothless' attention and gestures,

pointing him to a fissure in the rock. A blue-spikes cousin has just dived into it and has not returned.

The black dragon rumbles with satisfaction and tenses, stretching out his newly healed wings. They have flown very fast to test them but now they will do it for real.

On his shoulders, Hiccup smiles a wide grin, showing all his fangs at the prospect of flying properly after all that slow stalking, and crouches so they can go faster and the air will not fight them. He feels every muscle tense, every decision and estimate and observation made in the way Toothless moves and the way he breathes " if they could read each other's minds they could not have communicated more clearly.

Lunge " faster, faster_, and Toothless banks for a moment right above the fissure to see if they can safely dive into it. It goes a long way down and a long way in and he feels Hiccup shift, urging him forward.

A second rapid sprint, and they are in the darkness of the caves inside the mountain.

It is warmer in here, and there are no guards. The black dragon hurriedly slips away from the entrance and deeper into a side passage of the caverns, rubbing against the walls to pick up the scent of the nest so that their stranger-scent will not give them away in the dark. But they are not challenged.

This is a new strange place, but Toothless moves forward confidently, following something that Hiccup cannot detect. This in particular does not worry the smaller dragon " Toothless can smell things he cannot " but the whole place does. He feels like there are bugs in his head_, and no amount of shaking will make them go away.

After a few turns Hiccup sees fire-light ahead of them, but a strange fire-light, constant and steady rather than flickering like dragon-fire.

They come out on a ledge overlooking a deep cave that falls away far below them. It is filled with smoke and fog like all of the fog that should be outside has come in here, but fog does not do that! It smells strange, choking him with a scent he has smelled before but does not remember yet. And it is warm_, warm like they are high above the biggest fire in the world, like a sun underground but a dark_, dull, brightness.

Hiccup wonders if the world might be a dragon, and this is its heart-fire.

And then he does remember the smell, the smell of death hunger fear madness emptiness power rotted-meat deepest-darkest-sea-caves that is the smell of the sickbadwrongthing that tried to take Toothless away from him. It grips his throat and he cannot breathe for a moment, does not want to breathe it in to himself. It will poison him! The stink will fill his body and the sickbadwrongthing will fill his mind.

They have found it. It is here.

He is about to cry out to Toothless when dragons stream into the cave, all carrying kills and flying quickly. They soar over the deep cave and let go of the food and eat none of it, flying together in a flock so closely that it is impossible to pick out one from another, milling and turning and flying like a school of fish that looks like one silver thing from the air or a flock of birds that fools the hunting eye, and so they must pounce at all or none.

Dragons do not generally store food, so Hiccup is puzzled. He hunches down on Toothless' shoulders, pressing his chest to the back of the dragon's neck, and growls _confusion fear fear strange bad strange fear worried_.

Toothless rumbles back at him, settling them down to the rock of their ledge.

Alarmed, Hiccup whistles an alert _ready go!_ They are intruders in this place and they are not part of the nest, they will be chased away by angry dragons if they are caught!

The black dragon growls _frustration_, shaking his head so that his ear-flaps flop back and forth, but does not rise and prepare to fly away again.

Below them, the food is all falling and all gone, and the dragons are scattering as quickly as they can. Hiccup can smell the _fear_.

And then something enormous, with many eyes and a heavy head and long tearing fangs, rears up out of the fog and snaps at the closest of the retreating dragons with a roar. When the fog shifts around it there is clearly a fire below that stains its scales a sullen red; the color shifts across its skin as it moves.

It misses, but in that snap Hiccup can see bones caught in its fangs. They look like dragon bones, but that is unthinkableâ€|but he can smell dragon blood and death and terror, and when it misses its first strike it lunges at one of the perched dragons, which shrieks and flies away and barely escapes.

He does not have time to comprehend the horror of this â€" it had tried to eat a dragon! â€" before the roar of an Alpha blasts into his mind.

**Hungry!** the Alpha demands. It tears through him â€" through all of them â€" as she roars. _**Hungry! Angry!**_ It is more sensation than anything else, and ravening hunger gnaws at Hiccup even as fury sweeps through him.

She is powerful and old and strong, vain and idle and jealous; she has been the Alpha of this flock for a very long time and this is her domain, her place of power.

Both halves of _Tt-(click)-th-phuh-ss_ are trembling now, terror running through them like waves as they cower away, but they cannot flee even though this is more wrong than they could ever imagine.

**Stranger,** she snarls, reaching out into her flock and sensing the intruders there. In response, the flock screams and screeches, and whether their racket is because they are frightened of her or of

the strangers is impossible to tell, because they flee into caves and back passages and take off flying once they are out of the reach of the killer of dragons that rules this nest.

**Come.**

Tt-(click)-th-phuh-ss are terrified, but they cannot move; she has her many eyes on them and they must obey. She knows they are there, she blasts at them, and they cannot hide.

This is a new trap, one without metal or ropes and no small pieces to take apart with clever paws but with the most dangerous of teeth. It is a strong trap, and it holds them tightly in her eyes.

The black dragon and the dragon-man who are halves of a whole step forward together, Hiccup still mounted on Toothless' back.

She looks up at them and they are not sure that they are out of her reach. She is interested in them " they have found her, they have come to her when she called them even though they fought for so long, and now she wants the dragon that is not like one she has ever seen before.

Her will slams into them and it is like a weight, absolute fear combined with absolute force, demanding their obedience to her, because she is the power here, great and wonderful and terrible!

This is her realm, she is monarch here and none challenge her! She was the one who found the warmth in the heart of the mountain, she dwells among it closer than anyone else can get, she brought the flock to her with her calls, they are hers to command! They belong to her!

She has grown on the tributes they have brought her when she commanded that they should feed her because why should they feed only themselves and not the great queen who rules the warmth that is liquid fire and rock from the heart of the world? She had demanded that they bring her food so that none of them would ever forget that she was the monarch of the fire, none of them would ever be able to take her place at the side of the greatest heart-fire of all. She must guard it and protect it so that it will stay! It is hers, and they are hers!

The food was good, and the fear better, and when they did not bring enough to properly reward her for protecting the warmth of the heart-fire that they benefited from she had punished them, she had eaten the slow and the lazy ones who would not serve her well and added their fires to her own. Now she is a great queen, and her footsteps shake the world!

And the world had felt her, it had shaken her too, and her island had shuddered around her and things had changed as the heart-fire roared back at her after she had roared at it for so long.

The heart-fire had moved and it had shaken her island and things had changed. The tunnel in the deep dark places near the blinding heat of the heart-fire had filled with fire and collapsed, and she could no longer use it to feed in the deep oceans that no one but she among

dragons knows about.

Now she is hungry _all the time_ because she cannot swim in the deep waters through her tunnel and eat the enormous dark things down there that only she is strong enough to fight and conquer! The fires want her to stay, she is theirs, she will be warm forever! She will stay in the heart of her island and her flock will feed her, or she will feed on them.

They must hunt for her, and she will protect the warmth for them. The fire is hers, and they are hers, and they will obey!

**You,** the priestess of the volcano commands, hard as stone and inexorable as lava. _**Hunt.**_

She grips them tightly and burns the commands into them.

**Obey.**

They must obey her, she is the power here.

**Hungry.**

She is the greatest of dragons, and she is so hungry.

**Hunt.**

They must feed her so she can protect them.

**Mine.**

Their lives are heâ€œ

Mine! Hiccup roars, an angry, frightened, _disgusted_ shriek that echoes off the walls of the volcanic cavern.

The binding straps on the flying-with have some leeway and he shifts so that he is crouching on Toothless' shoulders with heels set back and claws braced before him as if ready to be attacked, because she _is_ attacking them, rather than sitting on the black dragon's back, shaking his head as he does so to drive her voice away and roaring his loudest, angriest roar.

Mine!

Toothless is _his!_ They belong to _themselves_ and each other!_

Furious at the challenge, the enormous dragon who is death to dragons, who is an _eater_ of dragons, roars back at him. She has never been challenged, and she will not be challenged by something that she did not even realize was there. She had felt one dragon, new and different and strange but one single self.

**You dare?**

But they are _two_ who are one, and Hiccup does not hear Alphas quite so clearly.

He screams back at her _hatred defiance hatred denial hatred_, a noise much more draconic than human, the voice of something that had never been before and never would be again. It is new and strange and incomprehensible to her, and she snarls, disconcerted.

**What you?**

Hiccup screams _dragon_ and there is nothing of humanity to it. It is all that is good about what they are " flight and freedom and togetherness and the safety of the nest and the belonging to a flock and a family, sunlight and joy. And it is defiance, defiance of the monsters in the world that would take all that away from them, because flight is their nature and what they are but they will stand and fight to defend it if monsters like her try to take it away.

She blasts _**Hatred **_at him and he shakes it off with his cry still in his ears and held close and cradled like a precious egg in his mind, the best of treasures, to be protected and guarded and warmed against all harm and thieves.

Seizing his advantage despite his terror, Hiccup drops back into the harness ready for flight and digs his claws into one of Toothless' ear-flaps where they hang limp over the dragon's bowed head, simultaneously kicking the black dragon's ribs as hard as he can and shrieking _fly fly fly fly fly!_

Toothless' head comes up with a snap and he roars in his turn as he fights her grip on him, trying to make it crumble away like the rocks of the sea fangs beneath his claws. She is strong, and he can hear her too clearly, but he can hear Hiccup best of all because there is no line between them and he loves Hiccup more than anything.

If Hiccup can think then Hiccup will think for them both.

Toothless leaps, flying blind and mad and stupid, trusting Hiccup to guide them.

So Hiccup does something crazy.

Instead of turning their tail to the colossal death of dragons and fleeing " the old and the wounded never manage to outrun their deaths " they will fight. He urges Toothless forward and down, falling out of control towards the monarch of the pit.

It is a plunge into a nightmare. There is heat on their faces and skins and a furious killer trying to maneuver around to find and then get at the pair that has just flown too close to her for her to see or hear clearly with the screams echoing off the rock walls, because _Tt-(click)-th-phuh-ss_ are shrieking together, drowning her out and unable to stop anyway for the _fear_ of her. It is a long fall with death and worse at the bottom, and Toothless struggles to get his wings under control as Hiccup shifts his weight and slews them to the side just as a blast of fire misses them, scorching the rock and adding to the heat.

But _they have played this game before_ and before they can hit Toothless pulls out of the spin and gets his flight under control, still fighting the voice in his skull that commands him to stop, to stand still and face punishment for defying her. He dodges blindly

and feels a small clever paw catch one ear-flap.

Love love love, Hiccup purrs, almost inaudibly in the chaos. But it gives Toothless something to hang on to as they try to escape, landing briefly and hiding in the monarch's shadow.

Deep in the pit around the feet of the death of dragons there are bones, there are _dragon bones_ and they have been chewed on and spat out and now they are trampled underfoot as she tries to find the disobedient little dragons that have dared to refuse her commands. There are _skulls_ that are the faces of the dead and the hot burnt reek of old dragon blood, much of it, oceans of it: they are surrounded by the dead cousins who have been eaten by a monster that is trying to eat them.

Toothless whimpers, feeling the dead catch at his paws and pull him down, bones cutting at his scales like claws.

Distantly, there is the smell of old ocean " good ocean and real ocean " long buried under rock that trapped her in here as the volcano shifted, as her hunger grew and one of her food sources was cut off. She cannot dig it out and she is too proud and arrogant and spoiled to find another exit although rocks can be _moved _" she is content to be the queen as long as she has a flock to serve her.

And far below, through passages dug out wider and wider as the eater of dragons grew, they can see the fire at the heart of the world, like the liquid fire of rock-skin cousins but infinitely greater. It is a strong smell like salt in their eyes and dangerous, and it rumbles distantly.

The world _is_ a dragon! One too enormous to think about and too powerful to control or command, and Hiccup understands instinctively that the monarch of the pit is nothing compared to the fire that is her power and her captor.

She sees them, and her will stretches out to them even as her jaws lower to bite and swallow them both. Her eyes are on them, commanding.

The two-who-are-one do not need words to fly together, they don't need sound " all they need is touch. They have flown on the darkest nights and in the darkest caves and this is surely both.

So when Toothless closes his eyes he _knows_ they can do this.

And they fly; they leap at her as though they are the hunters despite that she is so much bigger than them, she is an Alpha and the ruler of the flock, she is a _monster_ and they are terrified of her.

But first they must fight.

He follows Hiccup's unspoken commands as he slews them both around to face her and recognizes the touch on the back of his skull that means _fire!_

With a shriek, Toothless blasts her directly, and again, and again.

The dragon-priestess of the volcano roars _**Fury!**_ and _**Pain!**_

She recoils from the explosions and beats her paws against the rock to make the earth shake. It is loud and disorienting and Toothless cannot _see_ but he trusts his other half.

Go! Hiccup's movements say, and his paws and weight tell Toothless where to go, so he obeys in perfect trust, flying up and up until a tap of claws tells him he can open his eyes again.

Toothless does not look back but he can hear the scream of absolute rage that tells him they are not safe, that they need to get out of here _right now_.

They have pulled the tail of a true monster this time.

He hopes they hurt her.

**Hungry!** the monarch of the pit roars. He can hear her teeth snap and does not stop to find out if she can catch them. _**Angry! Hungry!**_

And fangs scrape together right below his tail. She has leapt for them and missed.

Terrified, Toothless panics. They have never been in such absolute danger and the only thing he can think to do is run, to reverse and retrace their steps into this nightmare as quickly as possible, which he does at a dead sprint, and out into the darkness of the fog-ringed mountain slopes.

Perhaps she cannot get out of the island or does not wish to, but Toothless does not care. He takes off flying faster, faster, faster, diving into the blind maze with his heart, his beloved, the best of dragons who can face down an _Alpha_ and defy her still on his back and with him and they will be safe if they can just get _away_

â€œ

They fly as fast as they have ever flown â€œ they were _born_ to fly â€œ at speeds they have ever only achieved while diving, dodging sea fangs and dragons that have fled their vile, evil Alpha's nest for now, screeching in terror.

The wind whips at them, the fog grabs at them, but they burn through it, going nowhere in particular but _away_. Toothless shrieks in a whistling breath and fires it out to scorch away the fog but it comes back, it is _hers_ and she is grabbing for them. The fog is in their eyes and the fog is in their mind, trying to ensnare them as they try to outrun her, to blind them and deafen them and fill their mind with submission and fear and obedience, to bind them to her in the lost of the fog.

Toothless is full of panic and shock and he can hear Hiccup screaming back at her in defiance, dragon's voice full of anger and fear and disgust all tumbled together like a knot of seaweed around rotted bones. He joins his voice to his love's and they roar together, refusing her, defying her, filling the air and their minds with their voices rather than listen to hers, because if they fly fast enough and concentrate on that she cannot pull them back with their curiosity as bait, the warmth as the snare, and her power as the fangs of the trap.

He distantly hears Hiccup stop shrieking anger/fear/disgust and start purring, humming, singing _love you beloved you love love you beloved mine you love_ instead, and it is a good sound under Toothless' screams like he is going to blast something but he will not return there alone to shoot at her, she will kill him and his beloved best-of-dragons both at once and _eat_ them! How could they fight _that?_

The only thing he can think to do for now is flee, screaming to drown her out. He forgets their escape plan, forgets that the sky must be above the fog, and plunges through it as fast as possible. Suddenly there is something he can blast and burn: there are sea fangs! Toothless fires at the first one that blocks his way and it collapses, showering them both with flying stones.

Too many stones have hit them recently, and Toothless obeys the pull on his harness that stops him from trying to fly right through it in his thoughtless panic, banking sharply to the side instead and avoiding the worst of it.

Hiccup has an idea â€" he is the only half of them that can think right now. He raps his claws on Toothless' shoulder sharply and points at a sea fang nowhere near them, signaling _fire!_

The black dragon doesn't ask, doesn't care. He shoots at it and it explodes, crumbling.

His companion taps him again and they repeat the process with one on their other side, but not right in front of them.

Toothless will think about what that is about later, right now he just wants to _get away, faster, faster, faster!_

After an eternity of fog and mist and stones where the only thing to live for is the warmth on his shoulders and the horror of what awaits them if he stops, there is a wonderful thing.

There is light ahead.

Sunlight, there is sunlight! How can there be sunlight, it was just night! Did they lose the night? Is it morning?

Toothless doesn't care, and he can't stop crying out in fear. She is still out there, she is still angry, and they have to get out of her fogs as quickly as possible.

He flies blindly and in pure terror for the light, the adrenaline of fight-or-flight and fear and need-to-protect and flight at these speeds driving him.

When they emerge into the light it is _sunlight_ â€" and a blast of fire.

* * *

><p>To be continued.

****And:**** â€|if you're keeping 'score', the song for this chapter is Ed Sheeran's "I See Fire", which you may have heard as the credits song for _The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug_.

16. Chapter 16

ON WITH THE SHOW!

**Nightfall****, Part Sixteen**

His crew is laughing, but Stoick is not amused.

He had commandeered the fastest and most maneuverable ship in their fleet, along with the most experienced crew, and loaded it up with a number of interesting weapons and Gobber for good measure, since the blacksmith knows more about them than anyone, possibly even the traveling hunters they got the projectile nets from. A rapid argument with the ship's captain had resulted in the conclusion that they could bring all the weapons and still steer the ship as fast and as well as they could without them, and if anyone else disagreed with the chief they could be thrown in the harbor too.

That is how you solve things when you're dealing with Vikings.

Stoick would very much like to throw everyone in the smallish longboat that they have just nearly collided with into the water and leave them to swim home, but in the state they're in they might just drown and then he'd be short some fifteen otherwise perfectly good fighters.

Also formerly-roaring-drunk and waking up to be seriously hung-over fighters, but there are ways to deal with that.

Ways like nearly ramming the drifting ship in the half-light of predawn because everyone aboard had gotten rascally drunk after bringing what looks to have been most of the stocks of well-aged ale with them rather than a decent navigator or a good catapult. That would wake up most people, but not this lot.

So instead Stoick storms aboard and knocks them all awake with the flat of an axe that was just lying about the deck, roaring as loud as he possibly can.

It doesn't take long to get the disgraceful crew up on their feet, if somewhat wobbly when they get there, and properly shouted at. Just how they got away with this little expedition is not clear â€" no one is in any shape to remember.

Stoick isn't going to throw them in the water after all â€" he's going to leave them here drifting not half a league from Helheim's Gate and let the dragons eat them.

He doesn't do that. He picks the most sensible person he can find out of his own hand-selected crew and designates her to get the other ship back to Berk in one mostly intact piece. If she's short a few sailors by the time it gets there, he suggests that he won't ask too many questions. Of her.

Astrid, now, Astrid he's going to have words with. How could she have overlooked a boat full of Vikings carrying barrels of ale down to the harbor, probably, if he knows this particular group, singing very

loudly and badly?

The spectacle of it should put him in a better mood, but it doesn't. He glares at someone for laughing too loud â€" sound carries strangely through the gods-forsaken mists they're back on course for. They've spent too long stopping in at and shaking down the smaller islands around Berk, looking for the chief's missing son.

They've found nothing. Oh, plenty of local dragons, but mostly the less threatening loners that rarely raid the village, and certainly not in the organized waves that those monsters do. The crew had even gotten in some hunting and fishing on the side, until Stoick had whipped them back into shape with some shouting and gotten them focused again.

But they hadn't seen so much as a scale or a shadow of that Night Fury â€" or the boy.

If they have gone anywhere, then surely they will have come here, Stoick thinks grimly as the mists of the Gate come into view over the horizon, barely visible in the slowly rising dawn. He knows the perpetual fog too well to be fooled, though â€" let your guard down around the Gate, and the ship will be through it and lost before you can swing a hammer. He's been here before.

Never successfully. It's impossible to navigate inside the Gate, and far too easy to get permanently turned around. Ships are lucky to ever get out again, much less all the way to wherever in its depths the nest is.

He can already hear some discomfited muttering from the deck a safe distance from where he stands at the helm, unwilling to relinquish control of the ship until he has to. This is his fight. He will go into the Gate and bring back his son.

But if it's risky to go into the Gate it's mad even by Viking standards to go in while it's dark. Visibility in those cursed mists is low even in bright sunlight. So for the moment â€" until the sun is up â€" the ship waits, some of the oars deployed to hold her at station-keeping against the waves.

"You cannae be thinkin' to look for 'em in there," Gobber complains from where he's lurking at the stern, having run out of catapults to tinker with and net-slingers to polish. "In three hundred years we've ne'er so much as found the nest, much less one hidin' lad."

"This is where the dragons hide," Stoick grits out â€" they have had this conversation before on the way here. Well, Gobber has tried to have this conversation, and Stoick has ignored him. It's hard to avoid someone on a single ship, but Stoick has so far been able to distract his old friend by setting him to making sure all the complicated weapons are in working order and running the crew through firing drills. That had kept Gobber both busy and entertained â€" and as an added benefit, this crew has gotten quite good at hitting even small targets thrown away from the ship as practice. "This is where they'll be."

"Aye, if ye say so."

Stoick declines to respond to that. He grips the helm a little

tighter instead and waits for full daylight.

He desperately wants to go in there â€" and yet part of him also does not.

The chief ignores the second, smaller part, and sends Gobber off to load the net-slingers and ready the firing crews.

He is about to give the order to ship the oars and let the winds carry them into the Gate when a crewwoman looks up and asks her neighbor, "Did you hear that?"

Sound carries near the mists â€" everyone hears her and stops to listen.

After a moment in which everyone seems to hold their breath, Stoick hears it too â€" a high-pitched, whistling shriek that he has heard before.

"The Night Fury!" he snarls â€" and a chorus of gasps and chattering half-anticipatory and half-frightened erupts.

"Ready the catapults!" Stoick orders. "Crews to the net-slingers! Oars ready! I want it brought down â€" but not hurt!"

Vikings scurry to obey, and those with the keenest eyes and the sharpest ears scatter up the mast and onto the prow of the ship to get a bearing on where the noise is coming from.

Immediately, they can agree that it is getting closer, because it's getting noticeably louder. The chief leans on the helm, following their directions as the rowers haul on the oars even before he can command them to.

She really is a maneuverable ship. He knew they could bring all the weapons and still be able to navigate.

"Steady!" Stoick commands as the lookouts signal that the shrieking noise is as dead ahead as they can figure given the disorienting effects of the fog of Helheim's Gate. "Light the flares!"

These are lightweight woven balls of reeds and flexible wood and anything else that will burn, loaded into the catapults back on Berk â€" or here â€" and launched at attacking dragons to both disorient them and highlight them against the sky, especially at night. The Vikings have been using them for a while and while they don't do much damage if they even hit, it feels good to shoot fire back at the creatures for once.

"There you are," Stoick growls, eyes narrowing at the dark shape emerging at a truly remarkable speed from the fog.

"Fire!"

The crews have benefited from the practice drills â€" they launch the burning fireballs in unison, spreading a barrier of fire across the morning sky. The Night Fury is visible only for a moment before it recoils away from the sudden flames, beating black wings down and cutting that long tail underneath to keep its balance in the air, still screaming.

"Nets!" He almost doesn't need to give the order "Gobber's training has proven very useful, because given the choice of doing it right this time or being subjected to more sarcasm in front of your friends with nowhere to escape to, most people will do it right and count themselves lucky.

Rapidly expanding nets hiss through the air in the wake of the fire even though the fire crews are blinking spots from their eyes. They know that trick, and the net-launchers have kept their own eyes averted, trusting their crew.

That is what it is to be a Viking "to be able and willing to go into battle without even looking because you trust your fellow warriors to do their work right.

In almost less time than it takes to take a breath, the nets are tangled around the Night Fury and it is flailing, shrieking, falling.

But the gods are good and so are his navigators "it had emerged from the mists almost on top of them and because it was some distance in the air Stoick can roar "Forward!" and his oarsmen can surge the ship "bless her, she is a lovely mover, as good as her captain claimed "ahead so that the devil creature crashes to the deck rather than into the water. The uncontrolled and unwanted landing makes the ship rock with its impact, nose plunging into the water briefly, but she comes back up and stays level even as the dragon struggles. Stoick has no desire to try to fish that thing out of the ocean; let it drown and the ocean is welcome to it, but "

Amidst the ropes binding the thrashing creature, he can see a smaller figure fighting his way free of them, shedding dragon-claw gloves in favor of the knife strapped to his right forearm.

It's hard to miss that much falling dragon, so everyone is already out of the way when the chief yells, "Keep back! This is my battle!", and they could not press themselves much further into the bulkheads if the inner hull had been made of snow.

Stoick leaps down to the deck, handing the helm off to the nearest crewman, who looks relieved to have the sturdy wheel between himself and the dragon, and moves in to reclaim his son.

The wild boy is howling with fury and fear, hacking at the ropes that bind him almost as tightly as his monster pet, but not randomly, not stupidly. He knows how they work, he knows what they are, and he's getting out of them very quickly.

The moment he rolls free he's at work on the remaining ropes, trying to free the dragon's limbs. They're strong ropes, but his knife is cutting through them quickly. Obviously not quickly enough for his liking, though "his rough and shaggy hair flies as he tries to look at everyone at once, trying to figure out who is the biggest threat and who is coming for them, mouth half-open as if he is trying to cry out even as he gasps in another breath, shoulders heaving as he hyperventilates, panicked and afraid.

He is clearly terrified, but he won't leave the dragon, won't move

away from it, won't stop trying to get it free.

And he cannot cut through enough of the netting to do so before Stoick is upon him, snatching Hiccup by the scruff of his neck and wrenching that knife from his hand, throwing it to one side to clatter across the deck and vanish far out of reach, dragging him away.

Hiccup screams in frustration and wrath, trying to turn and fight, but his father is so much bigger than he is it's not even close to a struggle, not without those claws or the black dragon that is now fighting even harder to get free of the ropes. But there's no way â€" the nets are severely restricting its movement and it can't even open its mouth properly to spit that blast of fire.

Dodging flailing arms that are hitting quite hard and quite accurately for such a small youth with no real battle training, Stoick uses his size and weight to his advantage, wrapping the boy in a wrestling hold where he cannot move and cannot fight.

For a brief moment he is holding his son in his arms where he belongs.

For that same moment he forgets that it's not like fighting a human, and the chief roars in surprise and pain as the wild boy bites him, sinking his teeth into the broad forearm wrapped around his chest and tearing at it, twisting his jaws back and forth and worrying at the bleeding flesh.

"Enough!" Stoick shouts, getting a grip on that scaled leather armor and whipping the smaller figure around until Hiccup's back collides sharply with the ship's inner hull. He grunts in what might be pain or might be anger and doesn't recover in time to do more than growl when Stoick braces his feet against the pitching deck and traps the nearest clawing hand, leaning the unbitten forearm across the boy's slim chest and effectively pinning him where he is with no way to pull free â€" not unless he's a lot stronger than he looks.

But does he ever growl, baring bloody teeth and wrinkling that snub nose and all but flashing fire from dragon-green eyes. It's a noise that should not come from a human throat.

The dragon roars back to him â€" it has never stopped â€" and they sound too much the same for Stoick's liking.

"Enough!" he repeats. "It's all right, Hiccup, I'm not going to hurt you. You're safe. It's all right, you're all right."

He might as well not be saying anything at all â€" his son continues to struggle, trying to heave a man who must weigh at least three times what he does off him and get back to the dragon, crying out its name in that strange clicking way that sounds like "Tt-th-ss!" over and over again, a desperate wail.

"Listen to me! It's all right, I promise. You're going to be all right, you're safe!"

Hiccup roars at him like nothing human, and keeps trying to get away and back to the Night Fury, which is wailing now, sounding like a heartbroken human baby and fighting the ropes uselessly. Still, no

one dares approach it.

Momentarily, their eyes meet, father and son, and Stoick stares, trying to see the human in there, trying to find his son buried under the fury in his heart.

"Why?" the chief asks, not expecting an answer, not sure that Hiccup has understood anything he has said. He turns his head to look at the dragon briefly and cannot understand.

"You're my son, Hiccup" I'm your father. We're family," he pleads, softening his voice. "Come home."

Those green eyes glare into his, anger shuddering away into fear and distress.

"Why?" he asks again.

That long hair flies as Hiccup tries to duck away, but he's going nowhere until the chief lets him go " he is simply too outmatched.

But then his mouth works, tongue licking out to wet fear-dry lips, and he says again, "Tt-th-ss."

Stoick is about to growl angrily " they have gotten nowhere! " when he says something else added on to the dragon's name that is the only thing he has said since the Vikings brought them down.

"(click)-phuh," he gets out, that guttural way he says his own name, and "(click)-phuh Tt-th-ss" with something that sounds like "_hrrt_."

The chief's brow furrows under his helmet as he tries to translate the answer he'd been demanding and had finally been given. He'd understood the first two words said twice, but the last

His son makes a peculiar, frustrated noise, and finally manages something that sounds like "_uh_-_uffff_ Tt-th-ss."

He turns his head away and will not look at his father, fixing his eyes on the dragon and holding its gaze. For the first time, the dragon quiets, emitting a low, pained moan with a sob in it.

It must be something quite simple and then Stoick understands it, and his heart goes cold.

He is speechless for a brief moment. In that moment, Hiccup looks back up at him.

They're his mother's eyes, Valka's eyes, wide and pleading and frantic, and absolutely frightened as if it is a monster that holds him captive. And then they close as if concentrating, remembering, flailing for something, anything, that will get him back to that bloody creature.

When he opens them again they're truly desperate and Stoick is so caught by the tiny flare of scraped-up humanity in them that he barely even notices his son " Valka's son, Valka who had always

believed that there was a better way and never hesitated to try to find it no matter what the cost " lick his lips and try again.

"_Puh-eeeeese._"

And that he understands quite clearly.

"_Puh-eeeeese,"_ the dragonrider begs again. But when Stoick does nothing he drops his head, those green eyes vanishing, and then turns as far as he can to meet the dragon's equally-green eyes. The look they share is one that belongs to twins, brothers-in-battle, the closest of pairs, but how can that be possible? They are from different worlds " his son is human!

But he may as well not be " he does not think he is or does not know he is or does not _care_ because there is more of the dragon to him than anything human " and dragon and rider look at each other as if they are in the hands of their enemy and know that they will not escape alive, when the only way they can be together is to fill the world in their view with each other and die as together as possible.

The future crystallizes like ice in Stoick's mind, and he can see clearly through it what he must do for his son. No matter how painful it will be for him.

"Gobber," he says, his voice containing all that ice, an eternity of ice.

"Aye?" his old friend asks tentatively.

"Find where his knife went and bring it to me."

If he flicks his eyes to the side just a bit he could see his trusted friend standing there, but he can hear from Gobber's voice what the look on his face must be like, so he does not take his eyes off the broken dragon-child still held against the bulkhead. "Wha'? Now wait just one blinking minute, Stoick! Wha' are ye doin'?"

"You heard me. Get me the knife."

"I'm nae gonna let ye hurt him, Chief! He's yer son!"

"I know that," Stoick grits out. "I'm not going to use the knife on him."

Gobber yelps, taken aback. "Stoick, ye cannae hurt him!"

"I'm not going to hurt him! Now by all the gods, Gobber, _get me his knife!_"

The smith wavers, unsure, but the iron in his chief's voice overpowers him and he stumps off to where the blade has fallen, picking it up uncertainly and bringing it to the man holding his own son prisoner and frightened.

"I hope ye ken wha' ye're doin', Stoick," Gobber says disgustedly, but he hands over the knife. It's a good blade, well balanced and well cared for and more than sharp enough to do what needs to be

done.

The flash of movement gets Hiccup's attention, even to the point of breaking his gaze away from that thrice-damned dragon, and when he sees the knife held in his father's hand his eyes go huge and horrified. He knows what blades do, and even though there's nowhere he can go he tries to struggle away again, away from Stoick, back towards the dragon, all unsuccessfully.

The sound he makes breaks Stoick's heart, and he knows he will be hearing that noise in his nightmares forever " it is a terrified, hopeless, despairing whimper, heartbroken and resigned. And it's doubled " the dragon is crying too.

They both know what blades do, and they know they are going to die.

Neither can escape, but Hiccup tries so hard to reach out to the Night Fury " pinned as he is, all he can do is open his left hand and turn it so that perhaps from his perspective it looks like it is rested on the dragon's bound nose.

And Stoick flips the knife around and puts the hilt in that open hand.

"Go," he says.

He's fairly sure Hiccup stops breathing entirely, one shocked breath gasping in and going nowhere as his mouth opens in overwhelmed disbelief.

"If it's the only thing I can do for you as your father, Hiccup " go."

Stoick steps away, releasing him.

It hurts even more than he'd thought it would.

Hiccup stares at him and the knife in his hand and the dragon bound on the deck and bolts for the latter. He falls to his knees at the creature's side and drops the blade all over again, wrapping his arms around the Night Fury's neck as far as they will go and just holding the creature, desperately, whimpering with the release of tension and with joy.

The dragon croons back at him, eyes finally closing in something that almost looks like a beatific smile.

Its rider snatches up the knife and cuts through the nets as quickly as he can, sawing at the ropes and pulling away what he can until the dragon can shake itself free.

They should go " they should flee as quickly as they can and not look back " but the first thing the Night Fury does when it sits up is wrap a foreleg around its companion and hug him back, burying its nose in his hair and hunching its shoulders, making tiny little sounds like relieved sobs.

When it lets go Stoick expects them to vanish.

But Hiccup looks back at his father from where he's crouched on the deck in the dragon's shadow and ducks his head and shoulders slightly. It's brief and it's animalistic but it could almost be _thank you._

And then he springs to the dragon's back and it takes off in an enormous leap and a powerful downbeat of wide black wings, disappearing into the sky.

Stoick closes his eyes so he does not have to watch them go, bowing his head with grief and loss.

When he looks up again his crew is trying very hard not to look at him, but there are too many backs turned revealing tense shoulders and hands over mouths or eyes or entire faces for it to be entirely believable.

"Turn the ship around," says Stoick. His voice sounds dead even in his own ears. "We're going home."

* * *

><p>Stoick has driven the crew hard all the way here and they'd probably be justified in taking it out on him but they are merciful and leave him alone to stand at the ship's starboard hull and stare at the waves. He's deliberately not looking north the way they were going " he may never look north again.

After an endless while of waves and as much silence from the ship behind him as the crew can manage while still making good time back to Berk against the current and the wind, someone dares to approach him.

Unsurprisingly, it's Gobber, which Stoick can tell even without looking because he can hear the intermittent _click_ of Gobber's right leg on the planks of the deck and he knows how Gobber moves.

"Did you really think I would kill my own son?" he asks his friend coldly. It is not something he could ask of anyone else " but then no one else would answer him honestly.

"Ah," says the smith, "â€|ye've no' exactly been yerself lately, y'knowâ€|"

"That's not an answer, Gobber."

"_He_ thought ye were goin' ta kill him! Ye terrified the poor lad!"

"Gobber! Answer the question!" Stoick demands, turning away from the waves just a little bit to glare.

When he meets Gobber's eyes his friend looks like someone has just pointed a knife at _him_ " or maybe a big ballista or two knowing how tough Gobber is. "Ahâ€|" he tries to stall again, but then slumps, joining Stoick in leaning on the bulkhead.

"F'r a moment, I wondered if ye would," he admits. "And I thought ye might be meaning t' kill the dragon wi' the lad's own knife. Ye ken

that would ha' killed them both wi' a single blow?"

"I know. I could see it in his eyes â€" in both their eyes." Gobber has been honest with him even if he does not like what he has just heard â€" has he truly been so out of control that his best friend thought he might kill his only son? â€" so he will be honest in return. That is friendship.

"Astrid said it loved him," Stoick remembers. He has been thinking about this all day now. "That he loved it too. I didn't understand that until this morning. I saw them together, I saw them play together and defend each other and saw that thing pet him like a child, but I didn't know what it meant to them. I could see that the dragon thought Hiccup belonged to it, but all I saw was that if he was the dragon's, then he could never be my son. That only one of us could have him."

He hates this mood in himself â€" it is the side of him that only Valka ever really understood. He suspects it is why she married him, and hates that because she is gone he now hates the part of him that she loved.

"Dragons took what I loved from me," he says simply. "I won't do that to my son."

Gobber is silent for a long, long time, and they watch the waves running past the ship's flanks together.

Finally, he says only, without any trace of sarcasm, "Chief, it is a true honor," and leaves Stoick to mourn for his child.

* * *

><p>Berk feels strange beneath his feet. Stoick tells himself that it is only his sea legs and not that everything has just shifted from underneath him, that the thinness of the world around him is from spending all night awake at the helm because he could not bear trying to sleep and facing what awaits him there.<p>

And there seem to be more Vikings here than there should be. He spots several people whom he knows he sent out dragon hunting, and they all try to duck out of sight when they see him.

Astrid is nowhere to be seen. He still wants a word with her, but she's probably anticipating a different conversation than he is, because it is not a conversation he ever would have imagined before yesterday morning.

"Stop that!" he snaps finally as he tries to walk through the center of the village and half a dozen people start to make quick getaways. "Get back here!"

When they assemble sheepishly â€" he knows these people went out on one of the raiding ships â€" Stoick demands, "When did you all get back here?"

They shuffle and appoint a spokesperson by pushing the most off-guard of the group forward. "About four days?" he offers as if it's a guess.

"Let me guess," Stoick says. "You didn't find the nest, so you turned around and came back."

"Uhâ€¦no. I mean, yes? Umâ€¦"

The chief sees what has happened â€" it's a distinct risk with sending many different ships out in different directions on a dangerous and improbable mission. The ships are drifting home behind his back.

He should care more about that.

He doesn't. It doesn't matter.

"All of you, tell everyone to stop hiding from me. I'm not in the mood. If you're back, you're back. Get lost."

They get lost â€" except for the slowest of them, who Stoick catches by one arm.

"Where's Astrid?"

"Up at the dragon pit," she replies promptly, and leaves to spread his message.

Stoick wonders about that response as he heads across the log bridge to the training pit, trying to puzzle out what she could be doing there. He briefly remembers her talking about dragons, but he'd been much more focused on the fact that his son had vanished again â€" and now almost certainly forever â€" and hadn't heard a word of it.

There's a crowd of people gathered at the foot of the slope, most of them sitting around looking impatient or interested or restless. The twins are running around trying to take bets on something that sounds violent and risky whenever they're not arguing with each other â€" Stoick immediately disapproves of whatever it is just on principle. That almost everyone is armed is no surprise; this is Berk.

"What's going on?" he demands.

He's greeted with a ragged chorus of "Chief!" which gets a lot more solemn and intimidated as they look a little closer. Stoick doesn't even want to know what he looks like.

"Astrid's training with the dragons and she kicked us all out," a voice in the crowd reports â€" it sounds distinctly like Snotlout. "Dunno why. Just watching. Can't blame her for being distracted, though, 'cause I was â€" hey!"

Tuffnut must have just punched him, because Snotlout forgets what he was saying and goes after the twin, chasing him out of the mob and practically into Ruffnut, who forgets whatever she was doing and leaps into the fight, although whose side she's on is not immediately clear.

This has the added benefit of giving the gathering a distraction to watch, and Stoick continues up to the pit unimpeded.

He's watched children train in here for years, but this is something new.

As he looks through the chains and into the pit, he is met with the sight of a Nadder chained to a pole on a long " but not too long " leash. It's eying up Astrid, who is crouched on the floor of the other side of the ring, watching it just as closely, but not as if she means to attack. Fishlegs is leaning on a barrel out of their way writing furiously in that little book of his.

"Astrid!" Stoick shouts down at her.

Astrid jumps to her feet; Fishlegs does his very best to knock over the barrel, which must be full of something because it lurches but does not fall; the Nadder jumps too and screams at the chief, Astrid, Fishlegs, the barrel, its own shadow, and probably the walls for good measure, whipping its tail around threateningly.

"No!" Astrid commands it, stretching out a palm forbiddingly in a clear _stop_ signal.

It hunches its shoulders, ruffles its wings, and screams at her in particular. But no spikes go flying.

"See?" she tells Fishlegs, a bit smugly. Not giving him a chance to respond, she tips her head up and calls, "I'll be right there, Chief!"

She doesn't sound terribly enthusiastic about that.

And instead of leaving the pit through the wedged-open portcullis to report to him, she moves over to Fishlegs' barrel, opens it, and pulls out a large dead fish.

"Come on," she calls to the Nadder " its large blue head turns to follow her as she walks towards its pen. "Good girl."

It takes a few tentative steps towards her, chain rattling along behind it.

Behind the dragon, Fishlegs creeps around and unlocks the chain. The Nadder hears him anyway and whips its head around to scream menacingly.

"No!" Astrid commands again. "Come! Fish!" And waves the fish.

Unsurprisingly, moving food gets the beast's attention and it follows the fish until Astrid tosses the dead thing into the pen and the dragon follows.

Stoick watches, scowling, as the two very different Viking youths close the door behind it, careful not to trap the chain, talk to each other for a brief moment, and then leave the ring, Fishlegs snatching up his precious personal copy of _The Book of Dragons_ and writing in it and scratching things out even as he walks.

"And what was that about?" he demands when she climbs the steps to join him.

Astrid sets her heels in that `_I am right therefore you are wrong but you are yelling at me_` stance and lifts her chin. "That was progress," she retorts. "I think she remembers how often I hit her with an axe as a trainee, but understanding and obeying a command of `_no_` is a good start."

"â€|you are training dragons," Stoick says. He's too numb to be incredulous, but he thinks he should probably feel that way.

"To fight off the others. Yes."

"So this is what you've been doing when I told you to get the ships launched and protect the village."

She draws in a sharp breath.

"If this works," she says, never afraid to push back at him, one of the reasons why she's going to be such a good leader someday, "it `_will_` protect the village. We can't keep doing what we've always been doing, Chief. They're coming more often, they're raiding `_harder_`. We have to do something new. Turning our enemies `_against_` our enemies â€" find me a way we lose in that scenario."

Stoick doesn't bother. He remembers shouting at her before he left â€" something about `_I'll deal with you later_` â€" and knows she must be anticipating some form of punishment, especially because she then went off and did something she wasn't supposed to. He is going to have to be more specific with his instructions to her in the future if she is going to pull stunts like this.

But he doesn't have the heart to punish her for something that doesn't `_matter_` anymore. It doesn't matter that she scared Hiccup away from Berk when `_he_` is the one who chased his own son away from the entire Archipelago, when no one was ever going to be able to bring him back and make him something he's not and will never be: a Viking, a human. If she failed at an impossible task it is not her fault that it was impossible; it was his for giving it to her.

So he doesn't rebuke her. But there's something he needs to know.

"Are you at all aware that one ship went out with more barrels of ale than Vikings aboard?"

That was not actually it.

Astrid's self-control is good but he can see that she's trying very hard not to smile. It may be amusement; it may be relief that she hasn't yet been exiled from Berk or stripped of her position as his successor for losing Hiccup or now for all but shouting at him when he's grieving. "Um, yes sir. They got back very late yesterday sober enough to complain that they were forced to row at top speed all the way back here and the words 'slave driver' were used."

He doesn't care about that.

"Um, chief?"

"What?"

"Did you find him?" She actually looks concerned.

Stoick feels his face and voice freeze. "Hiccup's gone."

Her poise breaks and her eyes go big and blue. "I â€" I mean â€" what happened? Chief, is he â€" did youâ€"?"

It takes him a moment to figure out what she's trying to ask. "No, he's alive. We intercepted him and that dragon, netted it out of the air, butâ€"|" It will be all over the village by now, so it doesn't hurt to tell her â€" she'll find out anyway. "â€"|"I let them go. They flew away. They're probably halfway to the edge of the world by now and I can't imagine why they would ever come back."

"Oh," says Astrid, sounding relieved. "I thought â€" never mind. I'm sorry, Chief."

Stoick folds his arms because he is very tempted to put his head in his hands and never come out. But from here he can see the entire village â€" his village â€" and even the people in it â€" his people â€" when there are enough of them together and they're wearing bright enough colors, or are moving quickly.

There seems to be some kind of fight going on but since he can't hear any truly agonized screams and it's acquiring an audience it's probably not his concern right now. There is another ship slinking back in to the harbor or whatever it is ships do when they're trying to get somewhere without being noticed. Over the horizon a little way, there is a plume of smoke coming up from the islet he saw in passing that _someone_ had set on fire. Closer to home, there is a herd of sheep about to wander through Gobber's forge, and the smith himself is still down by the ship offloading the net launchers and flare catapults â€" well, he is watching other people do that and telling them what to do.

This is his world, and he will have to deal with it from now on. And he will. He'll move on and survive and bear the weight of his responsibilities to his besieged people, because that's who he is.

"Astrid," he says curtly, "tell me something."

"Yes, sir?"

"Did you ever teach â€" " He grits his teeth and says his lost son's name. "Hiccup the word _please_?"

He looks over and down at her. Astrid's eyebrows have gone up and she looks very confused. "Please?" she repeats doubtfully. "Chief, I was trying to tell him we were in trouble, not teach him manners. I may have said it once or twice when I was trying to get him to do something or pay attention to me, but I don't think he would have picked it out of everything else. Why?"

"Never mind. It's not important." It's the only thing that's important. "Goâ€"|" he waves a hand as he tries to think of something for her to do that doesn't involve being around him. Stoick doesn't want anyone around him at the moment. "â€"|"break up that fight before someone loses a hand. And then call the remaining raiding ships home â€" send them out again to hunt if you can find people to do that.

We'll fortify â€" there's nothing out there to help us."

She looks down at the village â€" the fight is over, but she's observant enough not to question that. "Yes, sir," she says instead, and heads for the stairs.

As soon as she disappears down them, though, she comes back up again, just far enough to see him. "Chief?" she asks, and points at the pit behind him. "Can I keep trying? I think I'm on to something, and we'll have another defense if it works."

Stoick cannot get inspired about her crazy ideas right now. He does not want to think about dragons anymore, but he cannot avoid it. He will think about it â€" he cannot turn his back on anything that might save his people â€" but not today.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow he can do that. "Do what you want," he says finally. "Just don't put anyone else in danger."

After a moment, Stoick adds, "Astrid â€" don't get yourself killed either. I need you in one piece to run this place someday."

Her face lights up and her shoulders go back with pride at his confidence in her, and she leaves.

When she's gone he has to admit that it's an interesting idea, and he'll think about it later once he's grieved, at last, for his son, living but lost to him.

His son is alive, the chieftain of Berk tells himself. His son is happy where he is, he is happy with what he is, with one of the most dangerous creatures Vikings have ever encountered protecting him because it loves him with all its dragonish heart and he loves it as completely right back.

Stoick thinks he can live with that, knowing that his son is alive and out there somewhere â€" not what he'd ever thought his son would be, but so much better than bearing the endless weight of a dead six-month-old boy in his heart.

But if Astrid hadn't taught him to do that, then howâ€¦

When he figures it out, Stoick does hide his face in his hands, bowing his head with no one to see him and no one to judge him and no one to think him weak or failing as a warrior leader.

Because only his mother could have taught Hiccup that particular word.

Even so many years after her death, Valka has reached out to save her son's life and his mind and his heart, and probably her husband's, as well, because that most human of words had stayed his hand and stopped him from blindly tearing his wild, impossible son in two.

Valka, Stoick thinks to her, and it is most certainly a prayer, wherever you are, Val, my love, thank you. Thank you for teaching a little dragon to be just a little human.

* * *

><p>To be continued.

17. Chapter 17

ON WITH THE SHOW!

****Notice:**** I may have told some of you that we had two chapters left in this story; the characters have now told me differently and it's more like five including this one. Also, I am still assembling a Nightfall soundtrack and the list of suggestions that I agree with will be posted at the end of the story rather than piecemeal.

Nightfall****, Part Seventeen****

When Hiccup and Toothless had left home this most recent time, they had done so without a destination. When they are exploring, they go wherever they will, because they wish to. They do not travel meaning to go somewhere. They simply need to wander. When they leave the nest they set no direction, just hunting for elsewhere, following the wind by day and picking a star by night and chasing it across the sky. But they are not lost – Toothless has an excellent sense of direction and they can always find home by the stars.

Now they are doing so as fast as possible, fleeing for home and safety with nightmares and terror behind them. They save their breath for flying but their minds are racing as fast as wings, trying to make sense of all that has happened to them and trying to forget it at the same time, to set their tail to it all in their minds as they have with their bodies and leave it over the horizon so that the fear and confusion and horror will stop.

They speak to each other constantly without words, with the way Toothless breathes and the small sounds he makes as Hiccup presses close against his shoulders and the back of his neck and rubs his paws across black scales, thrumming back in a low, worried vibration more feeling than noise.

The two-who-are-one fly almost silently, but they do so intimately aware of each other's mood and thoughts, because they are sharing them.

Hiccup cannot make sense of why an Alpha who had tried to steal them, who had put lies in the teeth of another to carry to them, would let them go. The young dragon would have done anything to keep himself and his dragon-heart alive, would have stayed away from home forever and submitted to the will of the pfikingr Alpha if it had meant that Toothless would live. They had fought and the Alpha had won his surrender.

The humans had shot them down but then they had let them go. The human chfff with the red fur had said the same words that UhhrrrrrTT had said, that he was their mother's mate. And that was not so but he had believed it. Hiccup had seen that he believed it even as he had not hurt them.

But even trying to untangle that knot of tails is better than thinking about the monster, the eater of dragons that had wanted to

eat them too, that had tried so hard to trap them and make them belong to her with their minds dulled and their unity shattered and their heart-fires banked and guttering under the weight of her hunger.

He shudders and Toothless growls, smelling the fear and horror of his heart's-love, picking up speed and beating his wings as hard as possible to take them upwards, searching the air for a good wind, a taking-them-home wind that will blow even their scent away from the creature in the fogs.

Hours later it is Hiccup who insists that they set down, feeling the tension in his partner's body grow too much and sensing that their flight is hurting Toothless, wounded so recently. His muscles must be burning and his throat dry.

Down down wait no flying wait down now you easy us down resting peace easy good now down! he yelps, pulling on the flying-with to break Toothless' increasingly rough flight and using his lesser weight to throw the bigger dragon off-balance, suggesting and encouraging rest.

Toothless refuses _no no no no_ and rallies.

They argue for a while " Toothless wants to get home as fast as possible to the nest where they know they are safe from the monster that had tried to command them, but Hiccup will not allow him to hurt himself doing so. They are far away now, they are fastest of all in their nest and they are alert now, they are ready; the monster will not find them if they are watching for her because she is loud and big and angry and they are small and clever together. Finally he convinces his dragon-love to rest by pretending that _he_ needs the rest, which is a lie a bit but done in love.

A heavily forested island, which they have landed on before and know is safe as long as they watch for traps, provides them with food and clear water and shelters them until Toothless is breathing better and his wings hurt less. Hiccup delays them a little longer by the simple strategy of lying down and refusing to move, watching Toothless carefully to judge when he is really ready to fly again rather than insisting that he is. His love should know better than to lie to him, Hiccup believes, willfully ignoring that he is doing much the same thing.

They hunt fish and no traps hunt them, and they rest together on watch for nightmares that are real, and then resume their journey home.

In time with the flight of the sun far above them, higher than they could ever go although they have tried but it flies in air that is not friendly to dragons, ice replaces open water and they are traveling through fangs of it that they know. Hiccup purrs with delight at the cold clear smell of the air of home, resting his cheek on Toothless' head and humming _joy returning us together joy_.

And then from above they hear a shriek, a welcome sound, a _flock_ sound. One of their family is hunting and has seen them, and is glad that they are home.

Toothless calls a tired greeting back in passing, but the dragon-pair

wants to be back in their nest and _sleeping_ safely and do not stop.

The ice of their king, protecting their home â€" the relief of seeing it again is indescribable. They have been away longer than they meant to, longer than they wanted â€" but now they are home. They have survived everything, things they hardly dare to remember, and they are home.

More flock-mates greet them as they fly in over snow and through the twisting tunnels that lead to one of the large open caverns where dragons can gather and share warmth among the enclosing stone. Hiccup knows them all by their voices alone â€" in the pure darkness of the north the pair can hunt with many dragons all around them, and the half-darkness of the nest as the stars chase the sun away is unchanged from what he has lived with all his life.

Tomorrow, tomorrow they will look at everything with new eyes and be glad to be among their family again where they belong. Tonight they want only to sleep without dreams.

The flock has grown used to the two dragons being away quite often, and their just-for-us nest, the nest that is just right for them, is undisturbed even among a flock of dragons where fighting over things and stealing from each other is a fun thing and a good game. The top of the overhang of rock is a place where others can perch, but the space underneath and behind the rock fangs that bite up surrounding it is theirs. No one else sleeps there but them; there they can hide together and watch the others and simply _be_ in perfect contentment. It is their own small cave and their own private world.

Even their toys and their tools â€" and one can easily be the other â€" are undisturbed. The precious bits of paper that Hiccup has scavenged or stolen and drawn all over are still pinned beneath a good flat rock that was in the water and still smells like ocean even though it has not been there for a long time now. The stolen _pfikingr_ things that he uses to make and care for his scales and his claws and his wings have not been moved. The stolen holding-things that Hiccup has put his colors in have not been knocked over this time and they have not colored all the stones again in the red and the brown and the yellowish and the purple but not the black charcoal that is easy to make with dragon-fire and so he does not keep.

Without seeing any of it, Toothless stumbles into their nest and feels his beloved-companion slip from his back and down to the stone worn smooth from dragon-scales and still slightly discolored from when Starwatcher chased Hiccup into the nest and they knocked the colors all over but that is familiar and funny now.

Trusting Hiccup to know what he is doing in their own home, the black dragon flops down and purrs happily. It is nice and cool on muscles that are sore even if they did stop. And it is _safe_.

The relief is a physical thing, uncurling through their bodies like when there is a coal inside the wing that _burns_ until it can be stretched away.

From behind him, he feels Hiccup lean his front paws and chest on his spine and stroke down it reassuringly. The bigger dragon rumbles

love love love love love and feels a soft cheek rub against his scales, absolutely and unconditionally returning that love.

Toothless is already almost asleep when he feels his companion's clever paws undoing the ties that bind the flying-with to him and pulling it away; the dragon shifts reluctantly when Hiccup cannot do any more without his cooperation, but the moment it is free of him he goes back to sleep, knowing even as he does that Hiccup is purring too.

This, this is home; this is where he belongs, Hiccup knows as he wraps the leather into the smallest tangle he can like a hatchling curling up safe. Home is Toothless sleeping at his side, it is the smell of the many dragons that make up the one scent of the nest, it is the cries of his family as they play and hunt and quarrel with each other; it is the sound of the distant waves through the stone and the drip of smaller waters.

Home is no monsters, no humans, no threats, no fear. And each other.

It is perfect. Hiccup never wants to leave again even as he knows that he will not think that forever.

He puts the flying-with out of the way in the place where it goes and climbs over the sleeping dragon to his place at Toothless' side. It is where he has been all his life and is the only place he ever wants to be.

* * *

><p>Hiccup is never going to move again.<p>

He is going to lie here, awake but not awake, with Toothless warm against his back and a dragon-wing over him and their hearts beating together perfectly like even their bodies are purring. He will float in the right now like on calm sea waves that move him but do not sink him when the sun is on his face and the cool sea water is on the rest of him, fearless and content, and it will be perfect forever.

Happy love good happy home us home us family together home now safe happy, the young dragon hums and purrs to himself and his still-sleeping companion, closing his eyes again because there is nothing to see and that is how it should be.

He has no way of telling how long he has been asleep and he does not care. It is a long time " when he stretches ever so slightly just because he can his body is stiff. Hiccup chirps a _str-e-e-e-e-tch_ noise and settles down again.

Before he can go back to sleep, a new noise changes his mind " a familiar _hough._

Smiling his dragon's smile, Hiccup rolls out of the stretch to peek out from under Toothless' wing.

At first he sees no one and wonders, tipping his head to one side curiously and whistling a disappointed _where no here no?_

Then the ground just outside their nest past the rock fangs twitches, a broad-finned tail lifting into view briefly before smacking back down, and Hiccup looks up past the claws wrapped around the lip of the rock ledge above to the familiar face upside-down looming over them.

Cloudjumper knows they are back.

The instant he sees that Hiccup is awake, he starts growling.

They are in trouble.

Gone Tt-(click)-th-phuh-ss you-both where gone worried worried you-both reckless gone far gone, he rumbles in _irritation worry searching annoyed frustrated_.

His adopted son flattens himself to the rock meekly and whimpers back a hopeful appeal, rolling onto his back to claim obedience and better behavior in future and see the dragon he loves like a father at the same time.

Cloudjumper happy good joy Cloudjumper no angry Cloudjumper us sorry sorry back us home us good us brave us back sorry sorry, he promises as Toothless wakes up and lifts his head to join in the protest and the greeting at the same time.

They were away for a long time and they have worried Cloudjumper and they _are_ sorry but they have been _very_ brave!

But Hiccup is so happy to be back that the remorse doesn't last long, and the cringe turns into a delighted wiggle and a flip back over again to pounce at the irresistibly tapping tail.

This is a game they have played in the past and when he was smaller Cloudjumper could lift him all the way into the air with it when he managed to make contact. But he is unhappy with them today and snaps it away so that Hiccup's leap misses and he tumbles to the rock unhurt.

Instead, Cloudjumper reaches out with his wing-claw and leans over the ledge to pin him down, overshadowing their nest entirely and extending one wing to briefly separate the dragon on the ground and the one still in the small cave, which he knows the two-who-are-one do not like. _You!_ he snaps. _You gone you hurt worried worried worried!_ His tail lashes, and nest-mates who have come to greet the returned pair or happen to be in the area dodge or are knocked into by the bigger dragon's tail, and the area clears for a while until Cloudjumper has finished scolding the wandering pair.

This happens often and the nest is used to it.

Toothless howls with _irritation mine mine mine _at the barrier between him and his beloved-companion and makes little diving leaps at the edge of the wing until he manages to dodge past the dragon-wing and the rock fangs. He does not get far " Cloudjumper cuffs him with that waving tail for good measure.

The smaller black dragon snaps at it and rears up, flaring his wings in protest, only to fold them tightly again when golden eyes snap around to see the scars on them and widen.

Hurt? Cloudjumper demands, lowering his heavy head to look closer and growling but not at them. His snarl promises vengeance on whoever has hurt them, is_ angry angry_ but it turns into a reluctant mutter of_ good you back._

Hiccup is not intimidated anyway. He knows Cloudjumper loves them and wants them to be safe and well and happy but they _need_ to wander. And now that he is awake he remembers that he has questions, but he does not get to ask them before Cloudjumper releases him and climbs away up onto a faraway ledge where the sunlight from outside streams into the heights of the cavern, pretending to ignore them and sulking.

Sitting up, Hiccup shakes himself all over and finishes the stretch he started before Cloudjumper interrupted him, yawning _morning morning happy you happy love us home good home safe good_ to Toothless, who purrs and pushes him back over with his nose.

He will stay on the ground for now if that is what his family wants of him, so for a moment Hiccup considers going back to sleep right where he is. It is not as comfortable as their nest but it is home. Flight is his life but it is good to have the solid stone beneath him, to know that it will not shift under his paws and leave him drowning in ocean.

Instead he rolls back to those paws and scrambles after Toothless as stomachs rumble and remember that they were flying very far before.

Questions can wait. The fear is over and there is time. And part of him wants to forget and does not want to know.

* * *

><p>They have been away so long! It was a different season when they left and eggs that were laid before they left have hatched now.<p>

There are new hatchlings to meet and to play with, and Hiccup is very glad, because playing with them will help him forget everything that has made him doubt what he is and that tried to harm them before. So he climbs easily to the high ledge where the dragon he thinks of as something like Sun Chaser has made her nest.

Hiccup identifies his flock-mates by the way they act or things that they have done that were special or the way they look or sometimes just as an awareness and recognition of who they are more than any name ever can. And while the sounds he makes to call them do not always mean the words a human would use to describe the name, they are the right noises because they are the noises he uses and the ones they recognize and use for themselves.

He is eager to see the hatchlings that are not eggs anymore. They are family, the hatchlings and the young dragon; they belong to the same flock and one day they will fly and hunt and play and fight together.

Toothless waits below, engaged in an ignoring match with Cloudjumper, who is lurking wherever the dragon-pair goes today, as if they are

going to run off again immediately. They would not do that. They have come home where they belong.

But when Hiccup croons a curious greeting to his little brothers and sisters, they do not know him; they are afraid of him. They sniff at him and retreat to the other side of the nest, peeping and frightened, hiding behind wings that do not fit them yet. One of them hisses at him.

Horrificed, he drops to the bed of the nest and bares his stomach and throat submissively, defenseless and trusting, to look up at Sun Chaser, who knows he is here and knows him and knows that he is no threat to her hatchlings, whimpering _no threat no danger small good me family good no threat why why frightened upset sorry why?_

Sun Chaser knows he would not hurt them, so she only rests a paw on him and does not attack as she would if anyone else was upsetting the little ones " besides, he is too small to fight with too roughly and his family knows this. They play with him fiercely, they knock him down and aside and wrestle with him, but they know that they should not bite too hard or claw too deeply. Hiccup has broken bones before, but never under the paws of his nest-mates.

He lets her sniff him, and immediately she growls, but not at him. _Stink you human stink!_ she scolds. _Human threat danger avoid you fly-away no play humans bad danger you avoid! You you know hatchling no!_

He does know! He does! He was taught the smell of human as a hatchling just like every other little dragon in the nest from the _pfikingr_ metal things and fur things that smell most strongly that they steal and then use to teach hatchlings the scent. He was warned to avoid it because humans are dangerous. He does know that!

â€|doesn't he?

Hiccup shudders, pawing at his skin as if he could scrub the smell away just by wishing. He wants it _gone_!

Something crumbles under his soft-claws and he pulls them away from his jaws to look.

There is dried blood caught under the soft-claws and he remembers biting the Alpha to make him let go and let him go back to Toothless to cut him loose from the trap. There is human blood on him and he had forgotten!

Now he tries to get free, and Sun Chaser lifts her paw immediately.

Hiccup tumbles down the slope that he had just climbed, bolting past Toothless, who cries out after him in distress, but he is making the same noise and they blend together as one.

He knows the nest perfectly, can move around it in the dark, even when there are many dragons all around, and unerringly races for an underground lake that is seawater so not to drink but fine to wash or fish in. Without stopping he plunges into the water, splashing it everywhere and shaking not from the shock of cold but from

anger.

Gulping in a breath, the young dragon submerges himself in the icy salt water, clawing at his own skin in the darkness.

But by the time Toothless catches up with him he is crouched in on himself on the shore, soaking wet and silent with pure unhappiness, paws wrapped around his head to hide from thoughts he is too intelligent not to have.

He knows it does not work that way. He knows he cannot wash off the stink of human " all he will do is make it clearer even though the Alpha's blood is gone from his skin. He also knows that his body is lying and he is not human. He is a dragon and he belongs with Toothless, who has found him in the dark and is purring to comfort him.

You mine, Toothless reminds him.

Hiccup hugs him wordlessly, taking deep breaths and comfort from his presence. Yes yes yes, he agrees.

Stink not-want stink human, he complains a moment later.

The black dragon sighs, thinking, then urges him up up go us.

The flying-with is still tangled up in their nest, but they do not need it just to be together, only when they fly very fast and very far and sometimes upside down because that is fun. When he is on Toothless' shoulders as he should be the black dragon carries him back up into the light.

Hiccup does not question where they are going. He trusts Toothless.

Before very long, they are back in the central cavern where so many of the flock rest or wander through or can see from other roosts in the nest. Toothless drops to a resting crouch and twists his head to catch his partner's back paw and pull him down, batting him like a hatchling to rest between the bigger dragon's front paws.

Licking Hiccup's fur briefly, Toothless sits up and yelps for attention, calling the flock.

Dragons are curious " he soon has many, many nest-mates looking at them wondering what new entertainment this is. It is not the entire flock " there are far too many of them to fit in this single cave, and many of them will be out flying and hunting " but Hiccup knows everyone and they all know him.

Despite himself, even though this family has loved him all his life, part of him doubts. He crouches just a little against Toothless' chest, but looks back at them all.

Hiccup flock yes flock Hiccup family yes ours yes ours yes yes! Toothless declares, and roars an assertion and a challenge to anyone who disagrees, curling his tail around his beloved and embracing him with his paws.

The young dragon knows every voice in the nest, but even he cannot

pick out who first agrees _yes yes ours flock Hiccup ours family yes!_ as the consensus echoes off the cavern walls.

He knows that Deep Water is the first to pounce to their side and rest her jaw on Toothless' shoulder and smile a dragon-smile at them together; he sees Cliff Diver all but knock his mate aside in his haste to join her; Hide-and-Seek slips past them both to lick him enthusiastically and press against Toothless' side, joining her voice to the chorus of _yes ours family yes Hiccup flock!_

Mine hatchling mine, Cloudjumper snarls in case anyone doubted, temporarily abandoning the pretense of sulking and spreading all his wings at once.

Ours yes ours Hiccup family! the flock chatters. _Hiccup ours!_

Purring and chirping and crooning their agreement and their acceptance and their love, their family curls around _Tt-(click)-th-phuh-ss_ so that they are back where they belong, clamoring to declare that he is _theirs_.

Hiccup finds himself laughing a dragon-laugh and trying to hold back the strange ocean at the same time, petting every nose and paw and tail that gets through to nudge him and trying to purr _family family love all flock family belonging good love_ back to them.

Need you traps biting! Survivor reminds him, turning to show Hiccup the gash down his side that would have killed him if a dragon-boy with clever paws had not been able to release the trap and stitch the wound closed to keep the blood inside so the scales could heal. _Good you good good!_

He is protected by Toothless' paws â€" no one _ever_ questions that he belongs to Toothless above all â€" but he does not hesitate to shove Ice Claws back when Silent pushes him into the young dragon too hard, or yelp with amusement at Pawprints when he dives down on top of the group rather than trying to push through, or growl back at Wolf Fighter when she growls at him playfully, and before long they are at the center of a purring mess of dragons as if it were coldest of all outside and they are huddled together because heart-fires are stronger together.

Leaning back against Toothless, who breathes into his fur and hums _being right_ smugly, Hiccup is too happy even to purr.

This is his family. He belongs.

Everyone knew, he realizes, except him.

And no one cares.

They love him anyway.

For some time they all purr together, sharing his joy, and Hiccup pets everyone he can reach with his clever paws in gratitude and love, until Treetop cranes his head over the group and whistles curiously.

Heads come up across the cavern, and the whistle is picked up and

repeated in many different voices, eyes turning to
Tt-(click)-th-phuh-ss.

Most dragons are territorial. They have a range or an island that is theirs and they stay there and hunt there and defend it.

But wanderers like Hiccup and Toothless bring back interesting stories.

By then Hiccup is sprawled on his back leaning on Toothless' shoulder and with his back paws resting on Morning Singer's back and Shadow Hider curled up on his stomach, all of them perfectly comfortable. He looks up at Toothless and hums, considering. Storytelling involves moving.

Yes yes curious yes eager yes, Lookout puts her paws on Melancholy's back and chatters until he growls at her. Unflustered, she nuzzles him and resumes begging _yes good yes you please begging please yes?_

Hiccup cannot refuse them anything right now. _Yes yes,_ he agrees.

Hiding game! Hide-and-Seek cries, and everyone looks away or moves a bit so Hiccup and Toothless can consult about which story they want to tell without spoiling it, clearing a space for the storytellers to work in and arguing with each other as they shuffle for room. Small dragons climb onto bigger dragons and a few take off to perch on ledges to watch.

Dragons appreciate a good story as much as anyone else.

Finally Hiccup chirps for their attention and their audience turns back to them. They will tell a good story rather than a scary one â€" neither of them wants to think about any of that right now, not when they have been home only a little while.

Toothless starts. He raises his head and swishes his tail to get everyone watching him, then prances around the open space with Hiccup on his shoulders, spreading his wings and looking around and down as if they are flying a long, long way. Hiccup closes his eyes and yawn-stretches to show that it is night in the story, sprawling on the bigger dragon's back and pretending to sleep.

He can sleep as they fly if he does it carefully and the wind is not fighting them.

Toothless yelps _look_ and cranes his neck to look down at the rock, pretending it is a lot further down than it is. He folds his wings back as if descending, while Hiccup acts waking up and being excited to land, which they show as a big jump into the center of the open space and sitting down.

Hiccup slips from his partner's back and explores the space as if it were an island, chirping curious greetings and asking _where dragons dragons here?_ He tips his head, listening; sniffs the air; calls out again. Toothless does the same, and they meet up again in the middle and whistle confusion at each other, _smell dragons no dragons where dragons?_

They flop down together and sigh.

As their flock watches, Hiccup points upwards and tells them _sun now!_ Toothless looks up, looks around, calls out for dragons again, deliberately ignoring his fellow storyteller, who moves away from his side and hides among their audience, stalking as if hunting. He rubs his scale-skins against the stone and dons his dragon-claws to tap against it as well, hissing a hostile threat.

Toothless looks over at him and is puzzled. _Dragon where?_ he whistles.

Their flock looks back at Hiccup, who grins at them, puts a paw on his skins, and then places it on Survivor's. _This!_ he gestures. He sidles over to Melancholy sinuously, repeats the action while Toothless pretends not to be able to see him. _Sneaky hiding,_ Hiccup tells them all.

Then he springs to the ledge that Silent is watching from, once again showing them that his scales match hers and he is hidden against her, and then to a momentarily empty rock. He has rock scales now " and then Stormracer scales when Stormracer lands almost on top of him, come to watch.

In the middle, Toothless worries _many dragon many where dragon worried threatened hunting_. He gets to his feet and growls, whipping his tail around to protect an imaginary Hiccup and trying to find the hiding dragons.

Hiccup snarls silently and mimics the way the dragons on that island had moved, low and quick and slithery like eels. A shudder runs through the cavern at his imitation, and some growls start.

As he snakes towards Toothless, ready to pounce at the tail or the pretend-Hiccup they are imagining behind it, the black dragon raises his nose and looks suspicious. He looks around exaggeratedly, then closes his eyes and tips his head to listen and smell.

Now Hiccup abandons his pretense of being a hunting dragon, leaping to the place where he was in the story, and pretends to see for the first time what Toothless is doing. He puts a paw on Toothless' shoulder and when the bigger dragon ducks it towards him, springs onto his back where he rides " but then dismounts again on the other side and shows that he is a hunting dragon again by choosing Fierce to have scales like this time, and then Crystal Finder, and then the stone between him and Toothless again as he crosses it.

Toothless uses his tail to point out all the dragons that were sneaking up on them, many of them and all around the two of them, then whips it quickly and springs up into the air, hovering some distance above his audience.

Into the gap where he just was, Hiccup pounces, snarling like the hunting dragons had done, and then screams angrily at the miss " and then pretends to be jumped on many times by other dragons, rolling around as if under attack by all the others, fighting invisible enemies.

Above him, Toothless screams and prepares to dive.

So Hiccup as all the hunting dragons at once freezes, looks up, makes himself big and scared, and dives for the audience, pressing himself against Hawk Eater and hiding.

Toothless lands again and roars triumphantly, and Hiccup returns to being himself again, perching on Toothless' shoulders and laughing with him at their enemies' confusion.

Toothless sits down and Hiccup slides to the ground where they both grin at their audience to show that the story is over.

Their flock purrs and chirps their approval " they do not have dragons that can change colors here, and it is a good story when the two of them get into trouble and get out again.

* * *

><p>After one more story " about small-cousins even littler than hatchlings that are friendly but try to steal food " Toothless notices that his beloved is beginning to smell sad and worried even though Sun Chaser has brought her hatchlings to listen to the story and they will play with Hiccup now because they know he is family and he smells like dragons the other dragons of the nest.<p>

Go you come we go, he urges, nuzzling Hiccup, who croons at him from where he is petting Warmest and follows immediately.

They curl up inside their nest together and shut out the rest of the flock, Toothless on his side with his back to the rock fangs and half-unfolding a wing to create an even smaller cave in which his beloved can hide. _Sad,_ Toothless murmurs. _No sad Hiccup-beloved sad why?_

Hiccup curls into his side and rubs his cheek against the dragon's ribs and the joint where wing meets back. _Happy,_ he purrs, but he does not smell like it. _Family here good good nest love safe happy good peace belonging good family flock good safe yes._

His dragon-beloved does not understand. _Hiccup sad!_ he insists.

The young dragon hides against him for a moment, closing his eyes against black scales and listening to his breath and heartbeat.

Monster hungry hating hungry angry monster, he cries quietly, and Toothless shudders and growls.

No.

Monster there far, Hiccup worries.

No no-here hate danger bad avoid! Hiccup hurting sad why?

His beloved struggles to explain. _Here nest us nest good safe good,_ he says, then growls. _Monster nest bad scared dragons no safe bad._

Toothless watches as Hiccup pulls away from him, almost pacing back

and forth across their nest, quick and rough and angry and frustrated, except he does not have room to pace properly and only moves his clever paws back and forth across the ground, shifting his weight and shaking his head like his neck is stiff after sleeping too long and trying to make it hurt less. He yowls _confusion_ and _struggling_ quietly.

After a moment, he digs through a pile of things that he has collected and kept, coming up with a stolen holding-thing that he dips his bare paw into and then smears it in a long splash across his face, whimpering.

It is red dirt, one of the dirt colors that Hiccup likes to use to make patterns have color too. On his skin across his jaws it looks like blood.

_Us, Hiccup says, holding out the stained paw to the bigger dragon, and then curls up on the ground, looking at it.

_Scared, he whimpers. _Monster dragons scared sad dragons scared nest no safeâ€|_

Toothless knows already that the red dirt tastes bad â€" it tastes like blood almost as much as it looks like it, and not the good-to-eat taste of hunted prey â€" but he shifts so he can reach Hiccup and pins him down to lick it off him. That done, he drops his jaw onto his companion and looks at him expectantly.

The little dragon huffs at him, but is too distracted by thinking to object. Instead, he wraps his paws around Toothless' head so that it is the embrace the black dragon always means it as.

_Monster pfikingr scared, he says.

His beloved looks incredulously at him but does not pull away. He will never do that.

_Monster dragons scared, Hiccup thinks aloud. _Dragons raiding pfikingr fight kill raiding dragonsâ€|_

Toothless snorts and raises his scarred wing as an example.

The smaller dragon croons agreement and sympathy and love. When he squirms away it is only to get more red dirt before pulling the wing down so that he can lean over it. He pets at the scales of Toothless' wing with the dirt, making the scars stand out in dark red against jet black, vocalizing his anger at the injuries and the pain and their fear.

When there are no more scars to show there is still more red to give its colors to them, so Hiccup puts his paws against his own face. It is not the bloody stripe of blame and guilt and blood-on-them that it was before, but it is a reminder of it. Now he brushes aside his fur to draw red from the top of his face to the back of his jaw, framing his determined eyes. Realizing that his long fur will mostly hide the marks, he draws another stripe down the line of his snub nose.

And then he sits back on his heels, looks at Toothless firmly, and says the _pfikingr_ word "mama" before returning to speaking in the way they know best.

Mama human no bad dragon love mama us hatchlings. Hiccup sighs. He can accept that she might have been human because it changes nothing._ Pfikingr she Uh strrrrrTT angry sad scared she_, he remembers. _Pfikingr Alpha_ " he makes himself as small as he can to say this properly " _us go no thief_.

They owe him for that " the human Alpha with the red fur is not _their_ king but he spared their life.

It is true. Toothless does not like it but he understands what Hiccup is saying.

The whole place is wrong. It is a trap that is biting dragons who are their kin and humans who are not _always_ all bad and wandering dragon-pairs who are two-who-are-one.

And they hate traps.

They _destroy_ traps.

* * *

><p>There is sun above them and the green plants under their paws that like the rock and the clear water and the good air. This is the best place in the nest; it is the heart of the nest.<p>

It is _his_ domain.

The king of dragons is at peace when they approach him, great eyes closed, but they wait and they are rewarded with those eyes turned on them.

Tt-(click)-th-phuh-ss could be lost in those eyes, but they are never afraid that they might drown.

Majesty, Hiccup greets his king, the king of all dragons, crouching as low as he can and turning his clever paws upward, offering them at the king's service. Beside him as always, Toothless bows his head submissively, trustingly.

Distress, he cries. _Appeal-for-help._

**Little-beloved-one**, their king knows them together. His acceptance of them and love for them is a weight but the best of weights, like a hatchling carried on Hiccup's shoulders or in his paws, like the little dragon himself on Toothless' back.

They meet his eyes, and he looks into them, and they feel as he feels.

**Knowledge.**

So you know what you are.

**Resignation.**

It was always going to happen.

**Regret-for-pain.**

The king wishes that they could have been spared that pain.

Curiosity.****

What will they do now?

He gives them permission to look away, but they do not need to consider the question. Hiccup reaches up to Toothless and the black dragon curls himself around his beloved one. They breathe each other for a moment and then Hiccup cries out to the king as he'd challenged the mad queen, but in acceptance rather than defiance, offering as his scales and his wings and his fire all that is good about them, their love for each other, their joy in flight, their contentment to be as they are, their courageâ€|their choice.

Hiccup knows what he is â€" what they are. No one will ever be able to convince him â€" them â€" otherwise.

This is what he wants â€" he is half of **_Tt-(click)-th-phuh-ss_** and that will never change.

Pride.****

It is simple and absolute and endless, and the young dragons shudder with the intensity of it.

Majesty, Hiccup begs when he can think again, and cries out his fear and anger and horror, warning the king of a great and terrible threat.

Command.****

Together they meet the eyes of the king, and show him their story and their request.

Hiccup has complete faith in his king's protection over him and his other half and his family, but he dreams of even more.

He dreams that the enslaved dragons of the monster's nest can be free to be happy the way he and his family are, that the evil will never touch the small-cousins that like to play and to argue and that had accepted him so readily for what he is, that dragons like them who like to travel or wander or must do so and must go near that place will not be trapped like **_Tt-(click)-th-phuh-ss_** would have been if they had not had each other.

He even imagines better for the humans â€" **_pfikingr_** that had hurt the one he loves most in all the world and that had fought him, but also a **_pfikingr_** she who had fed them and could laugh and liked pictures and brought new things to play with and tried to talk to them and had trusted them enough to ask for help even when they couldn't give it. They had turned away from her. And an Alpha who believes that he was their mother's mate and had tried to steal them but then had let them go when Hiccup had begged for their lives. They owe him now.

If humans can show mercyâ€|

â€|then they do not deserve to suffer for the greed and the madness and the _evil_ of a dragon â€" an Alpha! â€" that eats other dragons.

**Protection.**

The great king does not want them to be afraid in their wanderings.

**Sympathy.**

It is an evil that cannot be ignored. He will help them.

**Curiosity.**

What do they wish of him?

The dragon-pair bow together, crying their gratitude and willingness to return despite their fear as long as they are together. They snarl and shudder and show him their hatred of the creature that traps dragons and eats them. They want to hunt her like prey and fight her like an enemy to help their cousins escape this trap.

**Caution**, the great king advises them. _**Calm**_**.**

He is too great a king to be too quick a warrior, and he is reluctant to kill or to hate.

**Intention****.**

They will tell their story to the flock, and lead those who wish to break traps with them. And the king will come with them to protect them and guide them as they steal the enslaved dragons from the jaws of the creature that is that worst of things, an _eater_ of dragons, and teach her that she is not as all-powerful as she believes.

The Alpha desires _**Freedom**_ for the imprisoned ones his wandering dragon-pair has found and felt for.

Before him, the two-who-are-one take comfort and courage from each other and resolve to be clever and fearless and worthy of the task he has set them, the little dragon who was born human taking his place on the back of the wandering black dragon where he belongs, making them something more together than either could ever be alone.

Although he is among the greatest of all dragons, and ancient, and has seen the flock that he protects change and uncountable numbers of his subjects die in their time, the king of dragons looks at them with love and rewards them for their heart.

**Mother.**

Now it is the king of dragons who shows them a memory, of a human woman kneeling before him with empathy in her heart and passion in her mind and a child with a dragon's soul in her arms.

**Love-for-Valka.**

She stands in his memories asking for his blessing with fire in her eyes, imagining a better world for both her children, not fearless but courageous.

**Proud.**

The king believes she would be very proud of them both.

* * *

><p>To be continued.

18. Chapter 18

ON WITH THE SHOW!

****Notice:**** ****Shrinking Riot/IOU_Superglue**** has done more fan art for us all! It can be found at: [http: \(doubleslash\) turbulentwavesofasians dot tumblr dotcom \(slash\) post \(slash\) 93660146103 \(slash\) so-recently-i-began-reading-nightfall-by-lelethetha](http://turbulentwavesofasians.tumblr.com/post/93660146103/so-recently-i-began-reading-nightfall-by-lelethetha) with the usual avoidance of this site's link-posting rules.

**Nightfall****, Part Eighteen**

For as long as anyone can remember, the Vikings of Berk have been capturing dragons to lock up and then set loose on armed children so those children can learn to survive against the day when it's their turn to fight for real. It's easier and safer for the trainees but, Astrid is beginning to realize, rough on the dragons.

Astrid is not particularly optimistic that she can get any of the ones they currently have to go from fighting humans to defending them.

Why would they? If anything, these dragons have even more reason to hate them than the wild ones do.

But Astrid can't let go of the idea. If she can take something away from her failure with Hiccup, it won't have been a complete failure after all and she won't have to feel quite so ashamed.

She's been at it for over a week now, mostly on her own because Fishlegs is more interested in observing dragons than working with them. He'll watch from the edge of the ring or outside the chain netting over the pit and take notes, but he's more reluctant to come down or jump in and risk his own life the way she's doing.

Astrid has spent the time dodging fire and fangs and being roared and jumped at, and she can't help but feel that she's running out of time. The raids are coming faster and lasting longer, so she probably has only another week, if that, before there are hungry dragons in the sky again. This has to work.

So far, it's not doing so.

Today, blue dragon and Viking woman glare at each other with equal distrust and skepticism. The latter doubts that she's getting

anywhere with this, and gods only know what the dragon thinks of it all.

True, Astrid has managed to get to a point where she's _sort of_ all right with having the Nadder in the pit with her without keeping it â€" her â€" on a chain, partly because when the dragon isn't on a chain she's hiding as far away from Astrid as possible. It's the same one that had been in the ring during Astrid's training, and she is mildly impressed that it has survived this long, one of the reasons she has continued to work with the Nadder despite the fact that every attempt seems like a new way to fail.

Astrid had spent most of an afternoon one day walking in circles around the edge of the pit with the Nadder shuffling away from her and bristling but not attacking, around and around endlessly until she wasn't sure who was chasing who.

When she had started to think that all she'd achieved was to reenact the last three hundred years in one afternoon with only two players, she had given up for that day and gone to bed, wondering if she'd wake up a little less crazy and decide that this whole thing is the joke that the rest of the village seems to think it is.

"Because they do," Astrid complains to the Nadder, because she has no one else to talk to.

The blue dragon ruffles her wings, making herself look bigger defensively.

"My people think I'm crazy for trying this. We've always managed just by knowing that dragons are the enemy, that you're a monster."

The Nadder is easy to talk to because she's so obviously not listening. It's exactly like talking at Hiccup when he was ignoring her â€" not running away from her, just not caring that she was there and making noises.

"But damn you, how am I supposed to ignore something like Toothless? He must have learned to get along with â€" oh, who am I kidding?" she demands, not expecting a response. "â€" to love a human. Even one that thinks he's a dragon. So it can be done."

Astrid has refused to name the Nadder anything more specific than "You", because she wants to train it and the others for war. _When_ she succeeds in training them, and she _will_ no matter what it takes, if she's going to send them up into battle against the attacking dragons then some of them are going to get killed in the fight. If there's one thing Astrid knows more than anything, it's that every battle has a cost and any fight could be your last, and she goes into every single one accepting that possibility but resolved that _this_ fight will not be the one that kills her.

She goes into battle to reclaim her life, not lose it. Heroic sacrifices make good stories, but it is always a better day for the enemy to die.

Still, she's reluctant to get attached to this creature. The Viking woman guards her heart jealously and if she fears any pain at all it's that one she fears most. It's easier that way. The chief is no longer as angry as he was when he had been resolved to bring the wild

boy back to Berk and humanity by the scruff of his neck through as much dragon blood as necessary, but he is still not the exuberant chieftain that he was before Toothless had been shot down and the Night Fury and Hiccup had come crashing, however reluctantly, into their lives. So surely she'll be a better leader if she never lets anyone into her heart to hurt her the way that the loss of his wifeâ€|and his sonâ€|has hurt Stoick.

Right?

"Try telling that to Vikings, though," Astrid mutters, setting her back against the wall of the pit and folding her arms across her knees, raised defensively before her. "It's not hard. You're here anyway; we'd be stupid not to use you."

She has to consider this statement for a few minutes â€" Vikings are tough but she has to admit to herself that they can be very stupid quite often.

"I can't believe I didn't think of it before. I can't believe no one else has thought of it before. Or maybe someone did and they got killed horribly and that's why we've never tried it again."

This, she must admit, is a possibility. Everyone knows dragons can't be trained. Except her. She doesn't think it's ever been tried here, but maybe Stoick has heard stories from the other, smaller tribes in the Archipelago. But she can't ask himâ€|he doesn't want to know anything about what she's doing here.

"I'm not crazyâ€|even though I'm talking to a dragonâ€|damn it!" she cries, wishing she had something to throw. Her waving hand finds her braid and she pulls on it in anger and frustration until she realizes she's doing it and stops.

Across the ring, the Nadder whistles and cringes, tipping her head back and forth to eye up Astrid. She sounds worried.

Astrid waves a hand. "I'm not mad at you," she tells her. "Not much, anyway. I'm mad that I was stupid enough to chase away someone who knows what he's doing. I'm mad at the people in town who laugh and tell jokes about what happens to people who try to tame dragons. Did I tell you about the idiots in the Great Hall last night? I actually had to punch one of them."

If she did, the Nadder is not telling.

For a while, there's silence in the ring as Astrid thinks about things she will never say out loud, even to a dragon that doesn't understand her and can't repeat it back to anyone.

She's beginning to doubt herself and this project. It's more than the fact that all she's managed to do so far is let a dragon off a chain and sit in a mostly-enclosed space that it's scared of with it.

It's the way her people look at her incredulously and wonder what's gone wrong with her â€" the way they doubt her as they've never done before.

It's that both of Berk's leaders are acting strangely, although Stoick is acting more rationally and is slightly more approachable

now that he isn't trying to snatch at an impossible hope and burning up inside with hatred at the same time, and they can't afford that sort of insecurity. Uncertainty means death up here in the north; you have no room to make mistakes in, so you do what you've always done because experiments get you killed the first time you get something wrong.

It's that Astrid hates to fail, and this feels like a failure, and she cannot afford to fail " not for her people, and not for her own peace of mind. She is good at what she does, and the things she does have visible and immediate consequences. She swings an axe and a dragon dies or flees. She hauls a line and a sail unfurls. She breaks up a fight or resolves a quarrel and the village is at peace for a little while longer. She gets up early in the mornings to run and the next time she needs to be somewhere quickly she outpaces the larger, heavier Vikings and is first to the scene. She tracks her prey through the forest, and she brings home food for her people. She gets results, and when she doesn't get the results she wants she works harder. But now she barely knows what she's doing and she doesn't know how to do it any better, because dragons are not boats " they have whims of their own she can't control.

It's that Stoick clearly hates this project and she doesn't like being at odds with her mentor on something so fundamental. They've always argued quite often " he respects her as his heir because she will stand up to him and not agree with him just because he's in charge and twice her size " but that's different. This is the chief objecting entirely to something she believes she is doing for the good of the village, if not outright forbidding her to do it. He won't go anywhere near the ring these days, and whenever he sees her on her way up here or when she's obviously returning from another useless session he avoids her too. His disapproval and hatred " not of her but of dragons as tamable creatures, because if it works all that will do is remind him that even hereditary enemies can be brought under control but his own son is lost to him forever " is like a fog over her head. They talk about what's going on in the village, what they need to do to protect their people, but never about dragons, and never about the inspiration for Astrid's attempt to train dragons to protect the village rather than attack it.

It's that, much to her disgust, she suspects part of her actually misses Hiccup.

Quite against her will, she'd sort of gotten fond of him whenever they weren't fighting. She'd hated not really being able to talk to him, hated that he was so very much a dragon when he shouldn't have been, hated that he wouldn't listen and didn't care about the trouble her people are in, but the time she'd spent on that shoreline had been an entirely new experience with an entirely different kind of "yes, a person.

Astrid is driven, competitive, a perfectionist, a woman of honor harder on herself than anyone else would ever be on her. She has standards and sets expectations of herself and then pushes herself to meet them no matter how high she sets them. While she loves being the chief's heir and the leader-in-training, and never wants to be anything else, her people are constantly demanding things of her.

Resolve this. Solve that.

Protect us, from dragons and the weather and other Vikings and ourselves.

Lead us. Answer all the questions, even the silly ones that we should know the answers to already or be able to figure out by ourselves if it wasn't easier just to ask someone in charge. Take responsibility.

Think ahead. Remember what we've done in the past.

Lead.

But Hiccup hadn't expected anything of her " if she had decided not to feed him that day, he wouldn't have cared or blamed her, he would have gone back to eating whatever he could find and survive on; if she had stayed away entirely he wouldn't have demanded to know where she'd been. He had mostly accepted her presence until she had hurt or threatened him, and once she had backed off again then the fight had been over.

Despite the fear she'd felt of Toothless, the dizzying wrongness of looking at a human figure who acted and spoke like a dragon but then drew and maybe even sort of thought like a very clever human, and the pressure she'd been under to communicate with him so she could ask for help, she'd almost learned to relax in his company from time to time.

She didn't have to be a leader around him. She could just be Astrid, and that is puzzling her now, because Astrid's concept of herself has been inextricably linked for a very long time to the idea of being a leader; she doesn't remember who she is outside of that role, because that is what she has become.

But now part of Astrid wants to go back and sit on the beach and draw in the sand and watch the waves some more.

At the time it had only been another source of frustration, because she has thought most about the times when things were happening, or failing to happen even though she was trying to make them happen.

But for the first time in her memory, Astrid had been given a chance to spend hours doing nothing at all.

If he was still here, she thinks she'd probably be talking at him instead of the Nadder " they have the same sort of ability to listen without really understanding or caring. It's like talking to the wall: pointless, but somewhat helpful just because she can listen to herself talk things through.

Maybe her people have a point " what in the name of all the gods is wrong with her?

She doesn't look up from her intense concentration on the ground before her until that ground darkens slightly as a shadow falls over her.

Moving as little as possible, Astrid lifts her eyes but not her head to see the Nadder standing over her, sniffing at her.

All her instincts yell at her to jump away, to duck into the blue dragon's blind spot and stay there until she can grab a weapon or spot a weakness in its scales that she might be able to hit with her fists or feet, or to expect to die.

She doesn't do any of that. She doesn't have a weapon and her audience of gawkers has gotten bored after the first few days of nothing happening and no interesting carnage, so there is no one to help her if she screams. She'd gotten bored in her own right with Fishlegs talking constantly. She suspects that his endless wellspring of information about dragons, most of which she is beginning to think is wrong in some way, is scaring the dragons they are working with as much as their presence, especially as for much of the time Fishlegs has been shouting at her from the ringside. So today Astrid is alone.

Astrid stares at the blue dragon, which has her head on one side to watch the Viking woman on the ground.

"Hello," she says. It's a stupid thing to say but it's better than screaming.

A yellow eye blinks at her, and nostrils flare. The dragon smells of fish and reptile and the dank stone of the caves ringing the pit. Astrid wonders what the dragon thinks she smells like. Metal, probably, like the axe she remembers using on this dragon a number of times before. The ocean, hopefully. Fear, hopefully not.

After a very long moment the Nadder huffs and retreats a few steps, crouching down like a nesting bird and staring at her from a safer distance.

"Okay!" Astrid says eventually. "My turn?"

She gets up from the ground and walks very slowly towards the Nadder, keeping her hands visible so the dragon can see she's not holding a weapon.

Step!step!step!but she must have crossed some invisible line because the dragon leaps to her feet and screeches, jumping at Astrid on the attack.

Her instincts take over and Astrid drops and rolls backwards, evading those long claws and tumbling across the ring on purpose. She comes out of the somersault on her feet and blesses all that practice in training and in battle, getting her hands on a javelin hanging from the rack on the wall and whipping it around to throw almost as soon as the Nadder realizes she has missed her strike.

But she doesn't want to kill the blue dragon " she'd have to start all over and she does not have the time or the patience, not with a war on and getting worse and worse every time her enemies come back " so Astrid throws it past her. The dragon's head snaps around to follow the spear's flight as it ricochets off the pit wall, then leaps after it.

Much to Astrid's surprise, the Nadder pounces on the fallen spear and carries it back to the center of the ring again, then drops it.

â€|and nudges it with her nose so that it rattles across the ground towards the Viking woman.

"Gods of fire and thunder," says Astrid, low and impressed and incredulous, completely taken aback. She will never understand dragons, ever. She kneels and stretches out to get a finger on the spear and pull it towards her, rising to throw it again in a different direction.

The Nadder thunders off after it, catching it in midair this time and bringing it back, dropping it on the ground in a different place and ignoring Astrid until she goes and gets it herself.

Dragons play _fetch? _Astrid can work with that.

Flinging the spear away for a third time for the blue dragon to retrieve, Astrid runs for a fresh sealed barrel of fish and opens it while the Nadder is distracted. This time, once the spear has been successfully caught, Astrid waves the fish to catch the dragon's eye.

"Fish!" she calls. "Come on! Fish!"

The dragon drops the spear and heads for the fish.

"No!" Astrid commands, using the palm-out signal that the dragon has already learned to recognize, pointing to the fallen spear, and beckoning.

Hiccup had understood things better if she used signs than when she'd used wordsâ€| She's still not sure how much of what she'd seen had been corrupted human behavior and how much was genuine dragon, but that's all she's got to work with.

After a few false starts, her fellow fetch-player figures out _spear, fish; no spear, no fish_ and picks up the spear again and brings it to Astrid in her jaws.

Astrid trades fish for javelin despite all those teeth right there and, as the Nadder eats the reward, dares to reach out to touch blue scales, keeping the spear carefully point-down and away from the dragon, saying "Good girl," in a low and unthreatening voice.

Dragons are definitely warm, and their scales are softer than she had expected, even when her unarmed hand encounters an old scar. Astrid thinks she might have been the one who put it there, and feels unexpectedly guilty.

The blue-dappled dragon growls at that, but is placated by another fish.

"â€|Gods damn it," Astrid says without any particular venom. "You are definitely going to need a name."

* * *

><p>Two mornings later, she steps out of her house into chaos.<p>

She is busy thinking about what she is going to call the Nadder and what she might try next and if _other_ dragons can be taught to fetch or if that was unique toâ€|she still hasn't chosen a nameâ€|and how that can be used to teach them to defend Berk rather than attack it, so she doesn't even notice the shouting until she is right in the middle of it.

Quite literally â€" it seems to be centered right here.

Astrid ducks as something flies over her head, and decides to stay down as something else flies after it â€" she thinks the second one might have been a weapon of some kind. There's shouting all around her of things like, "Little monsters! Get 'em!" and "Pests!" and "I've got one cornered! â€|never mind! Fast little â€"

She misses the ending of that under a dragon screech and is probably glad of it.

Interspersed with yelling humans, there's the extra racket of a whole mob of shrieking little dragons, which are buzzing everywhere and landing on things and speeding away into the air only to return to dive onto Vikings â€" Terrors are small but they're stubborn. And if the bellowing of the man currently running in circles waving his arms is any indication, they also bite ears quite hard.

"What the â€" Astrid doesn't get to finish her sentence, which is probably a good thing because she doesn't even know what the rest of the sentence would have been, before she's swarmed by Terrible Terrors, which all stop in midair at the sight of her as she stands back up and then dive at her in a shrieking cloud.

Small claws catch in her ruff and her hair and her tunic, snag on her belt and her leather skirt, cling to her leggings and hide behind her boots. Her arms come up involuntarily to block them but somehow the movement turns into trying to hold three Terrors at once against her body as they hide from the Vikings who are chasing them.

They all peep and whine and cry at her at once and in nothing remotely resembling unison, scolding and complaining and acting truly pitiful as they protest their treatment by humans.

Big eyes in oversized heads look at her appealingly and the Terrors talk and babble incomprehensibly, frightened chattering turning into happier sounds as the flock clings to her or hides behind her.

"Um," says Astrid, for lack of a better observation, and then notices anew that the crowd outside her house is trying to figure out what to do next. They can't attack the little dragons that have so unusually invaded their village. Terrors usually only venture into town to steal the occasional chicken or shiny toy, but they mob and attack Vikings who have gone into the forest and into _their_ territory, especially after dark, which is probably how they'd earned their name. But now they're all over Astrid and Viking axes aren't much use with her so close. And if that woman swings that mace in any direction but dropping it Astrid is going to be upset â€" it's a menace.

She wants one.

"It's all right!" she says as a precaution. "They're not trying to hurt me—what are you lot doing here?" This last is to the Terrors, some of which she thinks she recognizes by their markings as part of the flock that liked to play with Hiccup and Toothless on the beach.

Excited dragons shriek and wave their wings and make what she now recognizes as dragon-grins at her, crawling all over her like she's a tree. They keep huge careful eyes on the gaping Vikings but they also start making happier noises, thrumming and chirping. She realizes they're talking to _her._

Maybe this is what a beehive feels like. Astrid is somewhere between horrified and hysterically amused.

"Did you come looking for me?" she asks them, knowing she's not going to get an answer. "All the way into the village? Really? Don't you have anyone else to play with?"

The Terrors know she's talking to them and that she's not really mad even if they don't understand her words. They yelp joyously at the attention and the one perched on her head leans over to lick as much of her face as it can reach.

"Augh!" Astrid protests. "Don't do that! Get off!"

It was bad enough being climbed on by Terrors on the beach with no one to see her, but with what feels like half the village watching —! Astrid can feel herself blushing with embarrassment and blushes at that.

"Are you all right?" the woman with the mace asks her. "Hold still! We'll rescue you!"

She doesn't need rescuing. She needs—Astrid doesn't know what she does need, but she knows she doesn't need an audience. Unfortunately, she seems to have one.

She also has a decision to make.

Silly little dragons purr and stare at her and hang from her clothes and her hair trustingly.

Vikings stare and prepare to attack on her word.

Damn it all.

"Leave them alone."

"Really?" just about everyone asks all at once.

"It's all right," Astrid admits, chagrined and resigned to the fact that everyone has now seen her covered in dragons and she will now be officially crazy in the eyes of the village once this story gets around as it inevitably will. So the only thing to do is embrace it and stride through. "They're not hurting me. They're just looking for someone to play with and silly enough to come into the village after me. I bet they were swarming around my house when you spotted them, weren't they?"

Vikings nod.

"You followed my scent, didn't you?" Astrid asks the Terrors, who chirr at her cheerfully. She adds to her would-be rescuers, "I'll send them away."

"You can do that?" a younger man asks.

"Maybe not," she has to say â€" the last thing she needs is to fail at that in front of everyone. Well, the last thing that could probably happen right nowâ€"she can think of a lot of other things that she doesn't need. A freak snowstorm â€" around here, it could happen. A giant sea monster â€" one that eats boats. An attack of Flightmares â€" lots of them this time. An ambush by Berserkers, unless they've all charged off cliffs at some point â€" also possible around here. A sudden plague of twins.

That line of thinking is getting her nowhere, and she still has Terrible Terrors climbing on her in public.

"Butâ€"oh, I know! They came here looking for me, so they'll follow me. Watch this!"

It's unexpected free entertainment â€" she couldn't stop them from watching if she had a big hammer and all day to put it to wholehearted use.

This had better work.

"Come on, you little monsters," Astrid says. To her surprise, she can hear affection creeping into her voice â€" they're pretty harmless despite the little scratches she has accumulated from their claws as they scramble over her. And they're kind of cute in a really awkward way. "We're going to the dragon pit and I'm going to introduce you to another dragon that I want to like me. Seems like you do already, so maybe you can give her some hints. But you're going to have to let me move."

Astrid walks through the village with her head high, everyone watching her and talking to each other about her, and an entire flock of little Terrors following her quite happily. And she keeps her dignity every step of the way.

If she's crazy, at least she's impressively crazy. They'll thank her when she comes up with a whole new way to protect them from dragon raids and the humans get one step closer to winning this war for good.

"I want one," she hears a child's voice say in her wake.

* * *

><p>As she might have guessed, by the time she's played a few more rounds of fetch with the Nadder she's decided to call Stormfly, they've attracted a brand-new kind of audience, this one mostly consisting of children who want to come down and play with the Terrors, who are holding races around the edges of the pit for no good reason whatsoever.<p>

Far from recommending her to Stormfly in any conventional way, the

Terrors have done so by annoying the Nadder so much that Astrid's newfound power to tell them to go and play somewhere else " they never go far, but they do go " has endeared the Viking woman to the dragon somewhat.

It's something Astrid noticed earlier today that gives her an idea.

"All right," she calls up to the watchers at the top of the ring and over to the ones pressed against the portcullis, "but I need you to run an errand for me first."

Hands go up and she instantly has a dozen volunteers.

"Run back down to the village and tell Gobber that I want to put chain nets over the doors to the dragon pens. I need the nets and people to install them. Oh, and more fish " even little fish. Especially little fish. Got that?"

"And then we can play with the nice little dragons?" a red-haired girl demands.

They can when Astrid finds any " right now what she's got is overactive Terrible Terrors.

"Yes," she agrees anyway. "But only once the nets are set up."

Kids scramble and she and Stormfly and the Terrors play fetch some more. The Terrors had gotten the hang of the game just by watching, and of course they had wanted to play too, although at first she'd thought they'd gotten bored and left. After they'd swarmed back in and she'd been showered with twigs that were the right size for Terrors to fetch, she'd learned differently.

Throwing little sticks for little dragons had turned out to be kind of fun. If the little ones insist on playing with the Terrors, she's going to delegate that game to them. Maybe no one will end up too scratched by the end of it.

Not that she will admit this to the people who respond to her summons with stone-working tools and chain nets. Astrid bribes Stormfly back into her pen with another fish and distracts the Terrors by dumping the pail of bait fish in an out-of-the-way area where they won't get stepped on by her workers and leaving the flock to fight over it. That will keep them busy for a while.

"I'll show you," she says every time someone asks why they are hanging chain netting very securely in front of each cage. "I don't have time to teach all of these dragons to work for me instead of fighting me. So I'm just going to teach one " and let the rest watch."

If the Terrors, who are not very bright, can learn by watching, then surely the bigger dragons can do the same. And that's how Gobber has taught trainee fighters for ages now " he's always got to make an example of someone, and everyone else learns from that poor idiot's mistakes in a big hurry so Gobber doesn't have a chance to mock them too. At least, that's Astrid's theory.

This sounds like the promise of a spectacle, so she has acquired what

feels like most of the people in the village by the end of the afternoon. A number of them are grumbling that they were raised to _fight_ dragons, not play with them.

"Yes," Astrid says for what feels like the hundredth time, "but wouldn't it be something to have dragons fighting for you instead?"

"Dragons hate humans," she's told over and over again.

"Not always," she retorts. "I'll show you. If I can get a dragon to play with me, I can get a dragon to fight for me. And if I can get one to fight for me, I can get others to do the same. What better way to fight dragons than with dragons?"

She does not like having her instructions questioned, but she knows she's seen things they haven't. She's seen a human boy ride on the back of a dragon, the two like a single creature; she's seen them play together in the sand like children; she's seen them curl up together and comfort each other; she's seen something more than a monster in a dragon's eyes and she's seen a dragon's heart â€" which does exist despite everything she's been taught â€" in almost-human eyes.

They doubt her. All right. She'll convince them.

Her people will have to trust her until she can prove herself, and she knows that the only proof some of these people will accept is every dragon dead except the ones she manages to train to fight for them, and even then they'll probably want those killed as well.

She will deal with that after they win.

"I hope ye ken wha' ye're doin', lassie," says Gobber, who has come up to the fighting pit to oversee the work â€" and watch the show.

"I do," Astrid says, but she thinks it might have come out as "Me too."

Finally the work is done and the bolts are tested and it is time for Astrid to try out her idea â€" in front of what feels like everyone on Berk. She clears everyone out of the ring, including herself, and double-checks just to be sure. As she'd half-expected, two of the children have slipped back in to play with the Terrors. Their parents corral them and the Terrors fly up to hover around Astrid anyway.

"All right," she commands. "Open the pens."

Vikings hurl themselves against levers and pulleys, competing with each other to be the ones who get their pen open the fastest, and all the gates creak open at once.

All the construction noise has probably annoyed the imprisoned dragons quite badly, because a blast of multicolored fire erupts from every doorway before they're even fully open, but the chain nets, just like the ones over the top of the pit, keep the dragons inside, and eventually they run out of fire. A high wind disperses any unexploded Zippleback gas and the arena clears.

Astrid enters the ring frightened but refusing to show it â€" not of the dragon eyes fixed on her from all directions and the snarls and the chances that one or more of them has kept back one last blast; and not of the audience of people who are all going to lose all respect for her if this doesn't go the way she thinks it will, the way she's planned that it will; but of the enormous red-bearded man who she has just now spotted watching her with cold eyes from his chief's chair.

After all these days of avoiding her project entirely, Stoick has come to watch her. She suspects he has come to watch her _fail_ â€" he wants nothing to do with dragons ever again, except at the business end of a weapon.

"Stormfly!" she calls.

The only pen they haven't spread chain nets across is Stormfly's, and the Nadder is learning her new name. She responds to Astrid's beckoning hand and stalks towards her.

Halfway there, Astrid reaches out a hand and says "No!"

To her relief, the blue dragon stops. She holds her there for a few more seconds to show that it's not a coincidence, and then uses the same _come here_ gesture she'd learned from Hiccup to bring the Nadder closer.

"Good girl," Astrid says, petting Stormfly's nose. "Good girl."

From above she can hear mutters of doubt and amazement.

"It's all right," she reassures the blue dragon; Stormfly is starting to look up at the crowd nervously. But almost as importantly, the dragons in the pens are watching through the chains as dragon and Viking interact without trying to kill each other. For now.

"Fish!" Astrid rewards her with one from a basket protected by a shield she'd set there on purpose earlier. "Good girl. Play fetch?"

Stormfly knows that word, and she bounds off to find the javelin she likes best.

But once again, the Terrible Terrors find a new thing to interrupt. From one of the pens, two small dragons squeeze themselves through the chain links and leap upward to the circling flock, shrieking joyously.

And for a few minutes all is chaos as the Terrible Terrors celebrate the return of two of their own. They're loud and silly and ridiculous and so very happy that even from the ground of the pit Astrid can see some smiles.

When the Terrors have exhausted themselves and are draped over the chain netting over the top of the pit, the eyes of the surrounding people turn back to the ring, where Astrid and Stormfly are calmly playing a perfectly friendly game.

Finally, after she starts to hear applause for particularly good

catches on the dragon's part, Astrid takes the much-chewed spear back from Stormfly, pats the dragon's nose, sets the butt of the javelin down by her foot, and challenges the crowd, "Dragons we can teach to fight off dragons. â€|Anyone else want to play?"

Stoick is not among the volunteers â€" he is nowhere to be seen and she has no idea when he left, he can move very quietly for such a big man â€" but she sees some people who look like they're genuinely thinking about it.

For the next hour or so Astrid takes names and talks with her volunteers about battle strategies and goals and ideas and, yes, supervises a grand game of fetch between the children of the tribe and the Terrible Terrors until it gets too dark to play. She thinks she might have a chance to make this work.

If the gods will just give her a chance, they might be able to win the war this way, or at least do some real damage to their enemies this time.

Except early the next morning a full-scale dragon raid sweeps in.

The next morning everything changes.

* * *

><p>To be continued.

19. Chapter 19

ON WITH THE SHOW!

****Author's Note:**** Possibly T-rated levels of dragon-related violence in this chapter.

Nightfall****, Part Nineteen****

Me too me too me too! Hide-and-Seek begs, squirming under Ice Claws' wings to poke her nose into Hiccup's paw, smearing red dirt all over nose and paw alike. The young dragon-man chirps with amusement at her and laughs up at Ice Claws, trying to turn the shapeless blotch into something else, something new, but mostly just changing the color of her scales. It is not a new thing, to put colors on dragons â€" Hiccup draws on his Toothless-_beloved_ quite often â€" but it is a thing for now.

He has brought the colors with them but they are almost all gone now, and he does not mind even though the colors are special. _This_ is special. This is hunting a monster and breaking the biggest trap they have ever fought.

This is a hunting of dragons a long way from home and with the king himself at their side. It is a great and glorious thing that should be screeched about and cried out for the stars and the sun to listen to up there in their air where dragons cannot go even if they try very hard. But that would not be good hunting to scare their prey away or to warn it that hunters are coming by making a loud noise like a tail rattling through brush.

So the dragons that belong to the great king, that have come south to fight a monster, are hiding for now. They have flown high in the night following _Tt-(click)-th-phuh-ss_ who like to fly at night and close to the waves that the king has sent ahead of them under the sun. No dragon will warn the _sickbadwrongthing_ that is an _Alpha_ and an eater of dragons together that they are here. No human will make them fall to the ground hurting and frightened with rocks that fly.

This is not a thing for humans who are dangerous but perhaps do not always have to be the enemy: it is a thing for dragons, to hunt one of their own that is not a dragon anymore because it _eats_ dragons and no real dragon would ever do that. Even humans are better than that.

They are waiting on this island, keeping themselves hidden from the sky under the trees and the rocks, for the right time to hunt. This is a good place to rest and prepare even though they can see the hateful fogs in the distance. But there are no humans and in the deep waters beneath the high cliff the king can wait and protect them from the sound that dragons cannot hear but that they feel and that they can follow to the monster in a warm nest, the feeling-sound that is a trap and must not be followed ever but must be followed now.

It is Hiccup's idea, and he has sent hunters out to watch and stalk but not attack. They have not yet returned, but the dragons remaining on the island have faith in their king to watch over them.

Bad this-place bad bad know you-both bad here yes warning, Cloudjumper snarls as he alights on the crag beside where Hiccup and Toothless are curled together. Hide-and-Seek and Ice Claws scatter with their colors on them. _You this-way here no flying annoyed scolding here flying no!_

Toothless sighs _regret_ and _sorry_ beneath Hiccup's back where they are lying together. Cloudjumper did tell them not to fly this way, but they had gone the long way around and had forgotten.

His companion looks up with clear eyes at their protector, who settles himself on the rock and reaches out a wing-claw to cuff them for disobeying, tail flicking back and forth idly betraying that he is not really angry. _Lying humans lying Hiccup fearless dragon Hiccup yes yes,_ he assures Cloudjumper even as that claw shoves him across the ground, because he knows that secret and that lie are what Cloudjumper was trying to protect them from. But he should have known that telling them not to go somewhere would only make them want to go there even more, even if they had not done it on _purpose_.

Then Hiccup croons appealingly, curiously, before asking a question he could not have borne an answer to before, but now his flock is all around him and he is with Toothless and they are loved by the great king of dragons.

Mama human she human us mama Aka human yes true yes mama human yes? he demands.

That twitching tail goes very still and the claw on him lifts as Cloudjumper recoils, rearing up defensively on the rock. He growls beginning in _surprise confusion shock_ and becoming _angry

frightened distressed angry angry protective_ except it is _hurting hurting sorry sad lonely sad _at the same time.

It is a big sound.

Aka flock family mine flock ours! Cloudjumper insists. He refuses to be driven away by the young dragons but his head twists around to avoid and ignore them and look out to sea for the scouts instead.

But everything about him says _unhappy_ and before long he hunches all his wings and curls his tail half-around himself, climbing down from the perching rock to their flat place and lowering his heavy head to the ground, sighing a deep sigh that says _lonely sad regret sad love regret lonely sorrow._

Cloudjumper is family â€" they have upset him and it is their fault, so both of Valka's sons creep up to him and beg forgiveness, placing paws on shielding wings and rubbing faces against scales, purring and whimpering plaintively, ending up tangled and together beneath his jaw and against his chest feeling the unhappiness in the way he breathes and the warmth of his fires with their own.

Red-gold scales heave in a sigh, and Cloudjumper closes his eyes. _Aka human Aka love Aka you-both mother Aka good good good Aka love._

Toothless whistles quietly, curiously, wanting to know more and clambering onto the many-winged dragon's shoulder to listen better. He does not remember either â€" they were both too young â€" but now they both have the memory that the king has shown them to keep for their very own like a treasured thing.

Aka mine, Cloudjumper croons sadly. _Aka good love dragon she Aka dragon love dragon Aka threatened_ â€" this an alert that a flock-mate is in danger, whistled quietly so as not to disturb the resting hunters â€" _Aka me flying Aka nest._

The big dragon shudders, turning his head to look at Hiccup. _Aka dragon hatchling you dragon you flying no danger good safe us flock Aka you flock good good._

Cloudjumper had thought he was rescuing Valka, Hiccup understands, that she was threatened where she was, that she did not belong and that she â€" and her hatchling â€" would be safer with the flock. _Mama dragon here?_ Hiccup asks, putting a paw on Cloudjumper's broad chest and then his own. _Hiccup dragon here._

Yes yes yes you ours, Cloudjumper confirms. Toothless squirms around from where he has ended up across their guardian's shoulders to lean down and lick Hiccup's fur, purring agreement. _Belonging flock dragon love dragon us Aka you love you ours._

Hiccup sighs, leaning against Cloudjumper for the comfort of them both. _Mama you love?_ he asks.

Cloudjumper's wings and ruff flare out at the question. _Yes yes yes yes yes,_ he asserts until Hiccup pets him quiet with his clever paws, whimpering _good good no-threat me good_.

You mother's-mate, he assures Cloudjumper. This is a true thing, it is a known thing; it is like sunlight and stone. He hums _uncertainty_, reluctant to know.

Pfikingr Alpha mother's-mate? Toothless asks daringly, cringing as Cloudjumper's head turns to look at the black dragon on his shoulders, which spread with indignation.

Aka mine! he objects.

Hiccup brings his attention back to the little dragon at his feet instead, tapping impatiently on his scales and yelping _me!_

He meets Cloudjumper's eyes and insists on an answer with the way he sets his shoulders and the look in his eyes, ready to snarl and argue if he is not told.

Cloudjumper looks at him incredulously, but after a moment sighs in his own right, a much bigger noise and one full of _sadness regret loss loneliness grief love love sadness_.

Aka pfikingr mate, he agrees. _Alpha maybe uncertain why?_

They tell Cloudjumper about the _pfikingr_ Alpha with the red fur who had remembered their mother's name and then let them go but who said that he was their mother's mate. Cloudjumper is still not sure if the human he remembers mostly as a threat was the Alpha of the humans. He remembers mostly that the human with love for dragons in her eyes and the hatchling she held that had played with him and was not afraid should not belong to the angry human because they were special and should be protected.

The young dragon at his feet shakes this off like snow â€" it does not _matter_. Cloudjumper is his family; Cloudjumper has protected him and his other half and had loved their mother so Cloudjumper was their mother's mate and their guardian, and that is all that matters.

It makes no difference. Hiccup is not a toy to be stolen from nest to nest. He knows where he belongs. It is his choice â€" it is their choice, as Toothless leaps to the ground and curls up with him under their guardian's wings, all of them crooning _love family yes us good yes_ to each other â€" to make.

And they have chosen. They are dragons together, they belong with the flock. Nothing changes that.

Still, if the red-furred Alpha really was their mother's mate at one time when Hiccup was still a human hatchling before he was a dragon, then it is even more puzzling that he should have let them go. Hiccup loves intensely, passionately, completely â€" he would do anything, he would fight to the death to regain one he loves.

It is all very confusing, and while Hiccup has some answers they almost do not matter. They are like the screaming of seagulls â€" right now they change nothing until seagulls scream _threat_ or _fear_ and then they are to be listened to even though seagulls are stupid.

They cannot think about it right now, as they wait for the darkness

and for their scouts to return with news, so they wait and are together and brave as the sun goes away. Hiccup puts the last of his colors on Cloudjumper in the fading light, staining red-gold with the purple that is hardest to find and the deep brown and the charcoal black. He saves the scraps of the red dirt for his own skin, renewing the markings down the line between his fur and his skin on both sides of his eyes and to the tip of his nose, because they have been washed off since he put them there in the nest, and he puts red on Toothless' scales in wide and bold stripes.

Now there is already blood on them, so there does not need to be any more of theirs on their skins.

After the stars come out now that the sun is not breathing its fires at them to drive them away from its sky way up there, Lookout comes back calling out to them with excitement and anxiety that _dragons many dragons dragons go dragons fly hungry hunting dragons go!_

All across the island, heads come up and eyes turn to Lookout, who perches importantly on a tree branch and cries that she saw _dragons hungry hunting fear hungry fear go hunting go us us go raid hunt go now yes yes?_

Beneath the deep sharp cliff, the water stirs, and all across the island the dragons of the king's nest crouch and bow, greeting him as _Majesty_ with awe and love in their hearts.

**Protection****,** the king assures them.

They do not need to be afraid of the thing in the heart of the mists. He is with them. He will protect them from the thing that takes minds and breaks dragons and tries to steal them.

**Go****.**

Together as always, where they belong, _Tt-(click)-th-phuh-ss_ leap into the air with their family, and find their king's eyes on them like living oceans.

**Lead,** he commands.

Ahead is their nightmare " they have dreamed about it together and they have feared it all the more for knowing that it is real, that the _eater_ of dragons, the death of dragons, will try to eat them again.

But it is a trap, and they do not fear traps. They _will_ not fear traps, because then they will be caught already.

Toothless spreads his wings bravely, and Hiccup beckons to the flock _come us go us hunt!_

Together they dive into the mists, but now their family follows them and they are not alone and they are not afraid, and below the water the great king of dragons travels with them.

They can hear the calling that is a lure that is part of the trap, but their Alpha protects them from her voice like leaves between eyes and the sun, and they can follow it to the monster's lair without being caught in it. They will use the trap to break the trap.

* * *

><p>Once again they are alone-together in the sky, and they must be brave.<p>

The dragon-pair fly cautiously into the open space with the night sky above them, the island where the monster waits for them ahead. But clouds are gathering and there is no moon to show them the way tonight. Even the waves are quiet. There are no dragons flying into and around the nest, and that is a wrongness. It is a nest, it should be a home, but it is not.

All the dragons are gone, hunting to protect themselves from the one that is not a dragon, to beg for their lives with their service that is not the devotion to a good Alpha that is all
Tt-(click)-th-phuh-ss have ever known, but submission in fear.

It is a nest without dragons. It is a nest made of fear.

The black dragon shudders as he backwings and they hover for a moment in the darkness with the clouds hiding the stars, looking for the way into the mountain that they took before. On his shoulders, Hiccup places a gentle paw on his skull, pressing his body close so that he can rest his cheek on Toothless' head, as if they were curled up together in their own nest, sleeping-but-not-sleeping and comfortable and warm and safe.

But now they will strike, and Toothless growls low in his chest and dives willingly into the trap, his heart's-companion with him as always, ready and unafraid and silent with the hunched-shoulders thinking-working that in better days is for making good clever new things.

For this now on this night they are still free. They will have to be very quick and clever for the trap to not snap shut on their wings, but they are the best of dragons together and they have faith in each other, and their hate is stronger than their fear, and their love for each other stronger still.

The darkness of the night is a good darkness, a welcome darkness, but the darkness in the cave when they dive for the entrance is like mud when the snow is melting. But they go on.

Toothless remembers the way, and his nose leads him to the fire in the heart of the earth, and he can hear the calling of the queen of the pit but quietly because their king is close by.

It is a game, he thinks, twitching his tail as if to pounce on prey; it is the best of games.

As before they stand together on the ledge over the pit of fog and mists and the stink of death and wrongness and rot, but this time she will not chase them away in terror. If she chases them she will be the one taken by surprise.

The fogs are still with no dragons to stir them, but when they listen they can hear from far below a movement like breath.

The black dragon looks over his shoulder and holds the gaze of his

beloved, who looks back at him with clear and silent _determination love anger love resolution stubborn stubborn angry love-you_, setting himself for flight and bracing for the hate of the thing below.

They are ready, so Toothless rears up onto his hind legs, flares out his wings, and _roars_.

It is a _good good good_ sound in this place that stinks of fear; it sounds of defiance and life, and Hiccup roars with him, the two voices as much one as the dragons giving voice to them.

Disgust, they scream. _Hatred fury rage insolence mockery defiance
â€" __**challenge!**_

The challenge echoes, and it is returned.

**You!**

She remembers them.

Out of the mist emerges the head of the monster, all those eyes fixed on the little dragons who are one being, one self, who have returned to her.

**Hatred!** The queen of the pit roars. _**Kill! Hatred!**_

Her rage strikes at them like a blow although perhaps she cannot reach them here â€" but she can! She can see them and she can make them feel what she feels, tearing into their minds and filling them with _**Hunger**_ and _**Anger**_ that bites at them like teeth.

They were _blind_ to return! How _dare_ they challenge her? They are little and helpless and they can only run away, they are not a great warrior the way she is, they are nothing! She is the guardian of the heart-fire and its defender, she belongs to it and it to her and she is strong!

Power beats at them, demanding that they bow to her, that they submit and show her their throats so that she can tear them open and watch them _hurt_ and hear them scream, and before they die she will eat their bodies while they live, and she will _enjoy it_, she will devour them and they will deserve it for defying her!

She no longer wants to own them and make them serve her.

**Death!** she demands of them.

The eater of dragons reaches for them with her eyes and tries to command them, but they are protected, and they roar their defiance back at her together, refusing to obey. She is no true dragon! She is no queen!

**Hunger** tears through them, a pit in their bodies as deep as the one at their feet, endless and gaping and terrible like the crushing of the deepest oceans where no dragon can go and the gasping _need_ of the highest skies. And now the two-who-are-one stagger as they did not when facing her anger, feeling as she does, knowing the desperate body-hunger and the ravenous mind-hunger which is greater, that wants

to consume their hearts and all that is good about them.

But the movement reminds them that they are together, the weight on the back of the black dragon and the warmth beneath the dragon-man's heart where he crouches close to his beloved's shoulders, and they are not afraid.

Flying! Hiccup cries, and they leap at the monster, who blasts fire at them but they are fast, they are clever, they are together; she cannot catch them. The fire burns the air and stings his eyes but it does not touch them. They have come here to pull her tail and fight her when she turns on them, but they are not the only ones who will. And Hiccup knows that it is good that she is angry because it is hard to think angry and if she is chasing them she is not watching or listening to anything else.

And the monster _is_ chasing them and will not let them escape as they did before; she knows every rock and crag and gap in her caves and there is nowhere for them to hide for very long.

But it is _fast_ and Hiccup rejoices in it even as he and his love fly as quickly as they have ever done even without the open sky above them. It is like dancing and they are flying for their lives but this is what they were meant to do. So when an enormous paw with claws as big as they are tears apart the rock face, they are not there; they were but now they are not.

Too-slow! the dragon-man mocks her, shrieking insults from above over the top of her head where she has no eyes. _Slow you slow can't-catch-us!_

Many eyes burn with the fire below and the fire she breathes, and heat and flames scorch rock but not dragons, because _Tt-(click)-th-phuh-ss_ are somewhere else now, because every time she breathes in hate and roars out her rage and flame Hiccup can see and think just a little more.

She is too big to fight in this space " she is trapped in her own realm. All around her Toothless spins and dives and dodges and flames at her " she is easy to find and to strike at " as his beloved-companion guides him, watching all around for fangs and claws and her lashing tail that is quick and heavy, and for fire and rocks that are dangerous because they are in their way. But no sooner does he see them than Toothless knows too from the way he moves, and they fly as agilely as if they were in open air.

This is what they have been practicing to do all their lives. The speed and focus of the flight together, reckless and lithe and daring and free, drowns out her hatred. The racing of bodies and minds together keeps her hunger from their hearts, which are twined together like hatchlings in a nest in the cold when it is impossible to see or smell where one ends and the other begins.

And there is no time to be afraid anymore. All there is, all the world, is each other and the monster and flight that is joyful and a goodness, and even if they die they do so together, flying, and what could be better?

Hiccup taps his paw against Toothless' side and they slew and spin so that the monster's jaws miss them, roaring as she devours only stone

and Toothless blasts at a hate-staring eye. As they dart away Hiccup has a good answer and at once Toothless knows it too.

Living is better.

And beneath the roars of the challenged queen they can hear a sound because it is a good sound, a known sound, and they are listening for it.

Down! Hiccup commands, leaning forward to point at darkness in the rocks that is too small for the monster to go into. They have flown past it twice now and both times he has smelled the air of deep caves. They have fought their fight, they have held off an Alpha, and now they must escape.

But as Toothless turns and prepares to dive the monarch of the pit throws herself sideways to crush them between her scales that reflect the fire below and the rock.

Yelping in fear and pain, the dragon-pair falls in the darkness of her shadow, wings snarled against stone and bleeding from half-healed scars, dizzy from the strike and lurching as they struggle to regain their feet and their thoughts on the ground that is _too_ warm and humming slightly like an angry purring. Even though they are surrounded by crushed bones Toothless cannot raise his head and break the staring of skulls " their eyes on him are worse than the eyes of the dark Alpha, but he cannot breathe, he cannot see beyond the dead before him and waiting for them!

On his back he can feel Hiccup-_beloved_ _gasping in pain, see out of the corner of his eye in the dim light from the heart-fire and the triumphant flaming of the queen the reassuring sight of his heart's-love shaking his head, long fur flying as he tries to brush the dizziness of falling away.

Only the reek of death warns them, and they leap blindly, fleeing the stink of the breath of the eater as much as her fangs. Bones crack beneath her, releasing Toothless from the gaze of the dead, and he runs rather than flies, not knowing where he is or where the tunnel they were going to escape into has gone or when they will run out of time and they will be too small for the fight that will crush them.

They have two sets of eyes, though, and Hiccup can look while Toothless flees.

Go! Hiccup gestures, pulling on the flying-with that binds them together and changing their path, and Toothless obeys in perfect trust, leaping a gash in the stone where fire runs below like battle-hot blood. The screams of the queen have deafened him but they have only to be quick and clever to survive now.

He follows the line of Hiccup's paw when his companion points out _There!_ and runs, tucking his wings in close to go faster and protect the little dragon on his back at the same time, but Hiccup yelps at him and pushes the wings over him away so he can watch for the creature still trying to eat the little dragon-pair that plagues her.

Flame licks at their tail but they are too quick for her and dodge

behind a stone, and as the fire dies Toothless jumps to the top of it and _leaps_ from there, half-flying but he does not have time to spread his wings.

His claws catch on the edge of the cliff face that is the side of the pit and the black dragon pulls them both into the tunnel, back paws digging at the scorched rock beneath them. He adds new scratches to old scars that catch at his claws and make them go the way that claws have gone before, but they have made it.

They are too clever to rest " she will not let them escape, they can feel it in the _**Hatred! Anger! Kill-hate!**_ beating at their minds " so Toothless turns in the new tunnel and burns her nose when she tries to put it into the tunnel and breathe fire at them.

The dark Alpha roars and recoils, rearing up and trying to protect her vulnerable nose, which is torn and ragged and burnt-black already from the reek and the fires of her lair. Shaking it back and forth and stomping with anger, she reaches out with one great paw and digs into the tunnel with it after them.

Tt-(click)-th-phuh-ss run, trusting Toothless' ability to see in the darkest caves as they race past old scars in the rock, barely visible in the last glimpses of the mountain's heart-fire light, from where she has done this before, trying to catch at something down here that she wants but cannot quite reach.

When they discover what it is at the end of the tunnel that she has tried to catch and devour it is a greater horror than before.

They know this smell " it is a good smell and should be a safe smell.

It smells of eggs and nests and sleep-warm and hatchlings, and Toothless stops as quickly as he can because there are little dragons around his feet, peeping and crying out in terror at him and his companion " and at the claws scratching behind them, trying to reach and howling _**Hunger!**_

The hatchlings cannot hear the commands of the Alpha, but they can hear her roar and see the claws that block out the dim light, and they scatter away as far as they can.

But before she hid the heart-fire light from them Hiccup could see that there are scratches in the stone, in the walls and the floor and all the stone of the tunnel. Deep scratches.

She has done this before.

Furious beyond all reason, Hiccup leaps from Toothless' back and into the mouth of the tunnel, slashing back at those grasping claws with his own small claws, screaming _hatred_ of his own.

To try to take _hatchlings!_

He has no way of knowing that the placement of the nursery is the result of an ongoing war between the Alpha of the nest of slaves and an instinct as powerful and more in the hearts and souls of those slaves, that the queen of the pit has commanded them many times to

move the nursery to a place she can reach it, so that she can punish them better when they fail her, or that this is the only way they have been able to fight her. They have brought their hatchlings this far, but no further.

It is the one thing she cannot force them to do.

When the hatchlings are grown they will belong to her and they will have to hunt to survive, but they will not give her the little ones to eat.

Hiccup does not know this, but he does not have to. He knows the smell of evil, and he smells it now on the claws that reach for him and for his heart-beloved other half and for the hatchlings behind them.

He is a little dragon, and she is big, but his claws are sharper than hers and she is easy to find and attack in the darkness of the tunnel.

The smell of blood is not his, the scream of pain and rage is not his, but the roar of triumph as he feels his claws rip and tear into the soft space beneath her claws is.

The monarch of the pit starts to pull her bleeding paw away " and then it is gone in a single fast movement and a deafening roar.

Two heads snap up, two sets of fangs gape in delighted smiles " they can smell ice.

Tt-(click)-th-phuh-ss are good fighters " they have kept the eater of dragons too busy to hear the ice that eats through stone as their king digs his way into the trap to break it open, and now he has come for her. They can hear his roar of fury and disgust and the shocked scream of the queen of the volcano as a true Alpha of dragons tears into her domain and her scales.

Even the mountain shudders as they fight, and the two-who-are-one huddle together in fear and joy at once in the strange nursery, checking each other for wounds and reassuring each other with touch and sound that they are still together, still alive " that they have pulled the tail of an Alpha and survived.

Toothless nuzzles at his beloved's fur where there is blood in it from their fall, but does not lick at it because that will hurt more and he hates the taste of Hiccup's blood " it should not be on the outside of him but it is too often. But he croons with delight and satisfaction at the smell of the monster's blood on his love's claws, and Hiccup snarls with pride and even in the dark puts its colors on them. They have earned it.

Mostly they lean against each other and breathe each other and are relieved, humming fear relief fear flying fast flying us fight us together us good yes us proud us fight together in harmony as the noise of the battle trembles the stone around them.

It is only when the sound of the Alphas fighting shakes rocks down from above to attack them and little dragons scream in fear and scramble over to the bigger ones, hiding beneath them and peeping in distress, that they remember that the fight is not yet over.

Hiccup crouches to the ground and nuzzles scared hatchlings, breathing _good safe us good you little you safe us protect us good_ to them and letting them taste him to know that he is a dragon who is not a threat, who does not get angry when little ones nip him or roar when they climb on him, who stays still and purrs and protects them. He is a good safe dragon and they are afraid of the sounds of battle and the shaking of their home, so they cling to him and to Toothless and cry.

Toothless breathes into his fur and whistles a question " they did not think of this.

Nearly blind in the dark but for the scraps of light that escape the battle in the pit, but undisturbed by that as all his other senses are working despite the blurring from the fall that is already clearing, Hiccup raises a paw to touch his dragon-love's muzzle unerringly. _Go,_ he indicates.

The black dragon yelps incredulously, unwilling that they be parted _now_.

Go flock go flock flock here flock now! Hiccup commands, and shows that he will stay by crouching defensively over the little ones to protect them. _Flock help help help!_ he snaps, hoping that his distress will not scare the hatchlings he is trying to save.

Reluctant but trusting him unconditionally, Toothless rubs their faces together, tasting the good taste of his other half's skin that he has known since they were very small but even then they knew they belonged together, and purrs his absolute and all-powerful, stronger than fear, stronger than monsters, stronger than anything _love you love you love you_, and his other half tastes him too and tells him the same and they _know_ the unwavering truth of it.

And then the black dragon whips around and is gone, running for help.

When he returns very soon he does so accompanied by everyone who has come with them, crowding through the tunnel and squirming around each other to get back out again, and they snatch frightened hatchlings and helpless eggs and flee the battlefield as the mountain shakes beneath the feet of the Alphas. They will leave nothing for this trap to bite!

Tt-(click)-th-phuh-ss are about to do the same when Cloudjumper drops a wing in front of them and beckons to them to give him the little ones they are carrying on Toothless' back.

Go you go! Cloudjumper commands. _Give!_

His anxiety is clear in the set of his wings and the fire in his eyes, so they obey without question, racing down the tunnel and launching into the reeking air of the monster's pit.

The flight of many dragons through it very fast has blown away the fog, and through what is left they can see the battle.

Frost and fangs of ice ring the gash in the mountainside that the

king has torn even through the rocks, and they are shattered across the inside of the mountain like a dropped hollow stone with crystals inside like Crystal Finder's favorite toy. Many of them have been smashed even further and are melting away against the heat of the heart-fire.

Tracks of enormous dragons and great tears through the stone and broken caves show them where the king has dragged the dragon-priestess of the volcano out from her stronghold, and now they are fighting in the open air. In the darkness broken by flashes of fire the waves from their battle are like attacking dragons leaping down onto the beach from the sky, tearing it apart like a fish for scraps to play with until those scraps are too mauled even to be good to eat.

In the ocean, the great king roars, lifting his heavy forepaws from the water and bringing his tusks up into the sky to breathe ice at â€œ

The mad queen can _fly_.

She is heavy and awkward but she is in the air; her wings are misshapen and stiff from long imprisonment but she can fly and the king cannot. She is attacking him with fire and she is out of his reach, hiding inside the fogs that the great king has not yet frozen only to burn them away when she strikes.

No!

Tt-(click)-th-phuh-ss snarl together at the sight â€œ the sky is _theirs!_ They will not have that thing, an eater of dragons, in it!

Without hesitation they take off at top speed, returning for another strike at the monster of the pit, too angry to be afraid and spurred on by the smell of her blood on their scales. She can bleed, she can burn; she is real so she can be fought.

Now they are not in her territory where she can trap them among the dead in the dark and the too-powerful heat â€œ this is _their sky!_ It is where they belong and the sky on their scales and in their eyes is a joy greater than anything, the fight a taste as sweet as the best of hunts in their mouths.

Up and up and up the two-who-are-one race into the fogs. She is _huge_ and easy to see but they are small and hidden, and Toothless shrieks as they dive, flashing past her and catching her eye only to burn it from almost close enough to touch.

Her enormous wings falter, and she screams in pain, but she catches herself before she falls into the Alpha's tusks. When he spits ice at her the cold changes the air and makes it hard to fly, pulling her down, but she replaces ice with fire and the heat lifts her again as the king dives below the surface of the ocean to escape it.

As she rises she meets Hiccup and Toothless pouncing back down at her, and they will not try to surprise her again. Now they will try to hurt her.

They know all too well how vulnerable the wings of dragons are.

Her wide wing is such a tempting target, stretched out to catch the heat of her fires so she can escape, and Toothless can land on it if he does it quickly, tearing at the scales with claws and teeth and fire as if digging a hole after a ground thing that is good to eat but is hiding in the soil. He is hunting _battle_, and he will catch it.

Hiccup leaps from his shoulders as he does so, pouncing for the point where bone meets bone and ripping his small claws into the small spaces, fighting to disable the wing. He moves across the shaking, angry, living surface fearlessly, too furious and moving too quickly to be afraid. The rush of battle is burning him and if now he could breathe fire like his kin he would not be surprised. He _wants_ to burn her. When he roars at the wing he is tearing apart there is no fire in his throat but he can feel it in his eyes and in his mind.

The queen shrieks and tries to shake them off, twisting in midair to snap at her own wing, which flaps back and forth in pain.

Both young dragons lose the grip of their claws and fall, but both of them can fly, and there are good winds here to ride, as wild as the storms they love! In moments Toothless has snatched Hiccup out of the sky and they are together and bound together flying as one again, circling to escape from the raging monarch of the pit.

Their distraction has worked, and she has sunk too low in the sky.

From the ocean the great king leaps for her, snarling, and when they hit the water together, jaws snapping and tusks striking, the wave nearly reaches the fleeing dragon-pair, who hover at a safer distance and watch with satisfaction as sea fangs snap and crumble under their weight and water flies and even the mountain trembles.

The roars from their bodies are deafening, and the roars from their minds even more so, and the two-who-are-one shudder even under the edges of the waves.

**Disgust** batters them.

**Hatred** tears at the enemy, and it is a _sickbadwrongfeeling_ again to have that be directed at their king.

But they can also hear her _**Fear!**_

The king strikes at her with _**Challenge**_ and _**Power**_.

And there is _**Hunger**_, always _**Hunger**_ and _**Pride**_ from the eater of dragons, the worst of monsters.

But the king protects his own as he had promised his young wanderers, and he is greater than any arrogant monster who believes herself all-powerful because she had been first to find the warmth in the mountain and learned to force others to do as she commanded. In a movement that all can clearly see but that is too powerful to stop, a strong blow from his paw knocks her off balance and under the water.

When she comes back up again roaring with rage and fear his tusks cut through the air like claws and strike her skull with a sound as loud as sea fangs cracking and crumbling, bringing her crashing to the shore of her broken island.

The great king of dragons leaps from the ocean and his landing with great claws on her fallen body shakes the world, even for dragon-pairs hovering safely in the sky. The battered death of dragons cannot even breathe to scream as he leans his weight on her with his front paws and roars his overpowering declaration of
**TRIUMPH.***

From the mists his flock shrieks back to him, driving away the monster's fogs with their wings and their voices, rejoicing in his victory and the destruction of a monster.

Her defeat breaks her power, and already the fogs are scattering the way fogs should. Her voice in their minds even through their king's protection is fading.

She has lost, and his power grips her as she has crushed so many others, forcing her to bow at his feet even when he steps away from her, with her throat extended and head down.

Even now, defeated and helpless, wounded and humiliated, she roars her anger, and it is so great that they can all feel it.

She roars _**Rage**_ at the great king, who has come from nowhere to destroy her,

She tears at him with _**Hate**_.

But she tears at herself more strongly with _**Shame**_.

Her pride is a treacherous thing like another dragon inside her with its own hunger, and it is eating her now as it has eaten so many others.

_**Shame **_and _**Fear-of-Death**_ fight over her scraps inside her mind and she screams silently but so loud in their heads, hurting from the battle that goes on even when bodies are still. It is cold and sharp and relentless like the ice that has overwhelmed her fires, but it burns like those fires too, and the king's dragons shudder as they taste it with her, like hunger with no food ever again in the deepest of winters, like a dragon alone without a flock or a nest.

All around her, the flock waits, landed on the rocks of the shattered mountain or the shoreline a safe distance away or the sea fangs that are not broken, or hovering in the sky like the triumphant pair who are still flying when she is fallen. They are silent now, waiting for justice to be done to a monster, a creature that has wrapped itself up in stone and eaten its own kind in arrogance and scorn, and would have eaten the hatchlings that they rescued if it could, that had tried to eat their wandering dragon-kin and is now completely in the king's power, submissive at his feet.

And then â€

**Go.**

The dragon-king of ice and the north turns away from her where she lies broken on the shore of her broken island, frozen as much as if he had blasted her with ice.

Her trap had held her as much as her flock, and now they have broken it open. The trap is sprung, her power shattered never to be regained. She is free.

High above, Hiccup and Toothless shudder together, unhappy but unable to argue with the king. They had promised that they would free the captives they had found in this place.

They had not thought that the king would see the monarch of the pit as one too.

But they have faith in him as a good and wise king. He is the Alpha, the much-beloved and benevolent master of their flock, and they must obeyâ€|

Still, they are the ones who watch the dragon-priestess of the volcano as she struggles back to her paws, still favoring one, in the shallows as the king turns away to return to deeper waters and the flock takes off into the clearing skies to swarm around him and celebrate their protector and his victory, filling his ears and mind with their voices and their love and awe.

They are the ones who see her heavy head come up and her many eyes flash with her mountain-fires and her jaws open to reveal so many fangs with dragon bones still trapped in them.

They are the ones who see her gather herself to leap for the king's back that he has turned on her, fangs bared to dig into the spine that biting through will kill anything.

But they are swifter than anyone in their nestâ€|

Tt-(click)-th-phuh-ss dive faster than they have ever flown before, plummeting to defend their king, shrieking in a single voice.

Toothless' fires burn that gaping mouth and fill her jaws with fire, and when the explosion clears they are hovering between their Alpha and the reeling, burnt, and bleeding monster, bristling, _furious_.

There is a defiant and fearless fire as strange and wonderful as the bright and colorful waves of sky-fire, burning in their souls and in their eyes, running through them like lightning with no line between dragon-born and dragon-chosen, and it may be real or it may be a dream-thing from the power of their rage, they do not know and they do not care.

The two-who-are-one care only about the _eater_ of dragons who has even now lunged for them, screaming her endless _**Hunger! **_and the_** PRIDE! **_that is too strong to ever accept the mercy of a good king.

She snaps at them and blasts them with fire and **_**Hate!**_**

This is **_their_** fault! She was powerful and unchallenged and the ruler of a flock that served her and the guardian of a power greater than any! And then they escaped from her jaws and came back to challenge her; they brought the king here!

They were the ones who defied her, the little dragon who is both two minds and two selves and a single self together, one that she cannot properly control because they are so different, because they are something new and good.

They are the ones who have destroyed her " she will destroy them!

She will **_never_** let them go!

Toothless faces her hatred and roars back at her fearlessly, defending his family and his king and the half of him that he loves more than anything else, even more than his own life. He is **_burning_** with rage, enough to face an Alpha among dragons many times his size and defy her to her face.

But it is Hiccup who takes his eyes off those of the monster's for only a moment, because he trusts Toothless to hold them there while he looks for their next move.

He finds it.

The mad queen has many eyes but they are all watching the dragon-pair, and her mind is fixed on them like a trap coiled to bite, and Hiccup knows better than anyone else how to push a trap too far so that it will destroy itself and leave them free.

Up! he urges Toothless, pulling back on the flying-with that keeps them one when they fly and lets them do **_anything_**, and the black dragon can feel through the tension in his body that this is a thing that must be done **_now!_**

Unquestioning, Toothless flips his tail under them and takes them straight up, that impossible maneuver that the two-who-are-one do so well, like a dive or a fall but **_up_** so a victory always, racing for the skies where they are free and untouchable.

Blinded with loathing, the monarch of the pit rears up to follow them with her many eyes and gathers her poisonous breath to burn them from the sky.

"and powerful tusks tear into that exposed throat before the great king fills her with the ice of his breath and puts her fires of hatred and hunger out forever.

The king is merciful, but only to a point. He is kind, but he is not weak. He will not let this creature he has fought and spared once reject his mercy and harm the little wanderers who are unique and fearless together and dear to him. The Alpha protects his own.

Hiccup and Toothless are under his protection and no monster will burn them from the sky.

* * *

><p>It is later, but still night.<p>

The flock has brought the little ones of the nest back and their family has dug a good warm hole for the eggs while the hatchlings stare up for the first time at the stars in the sky all around where the fogs are blowing away for good, and sniff curiously at the icy dead thing on the edge of their island. One of them scratches at it and, when it does not move or snarl, pounces on as much of it as the little one can reach. Soon they are all playing around it fearlessly, climbing on it and jumping on each other.

That is good, and from the deep waters the king watches with kind eyes.

The two-who-are-one are resting on the warm sand, too tired and too excited all at once to purr or speak to each other in more than the most fundamental knowledge of _togetherness_ and _love_ and _relief_. Instead they are curled up together shaking.

Cloudjumper lands next to them and looks at them without saying anything, all his signals still and silent.

Then he wraps a wing over them and does something he never does and nuzzles them both like hatchlings, purring for them.

You-both good good good brave Aka proud me proud flock proud, he says, raising his head high and hooding his eyes.

Hiccup puts a paw on his guardian's broad chest and smiles a dragon-smile up at him. They have done good hunting tonight. But they are not yet done, and they must go on.

The dragon-man stands up properly as he so rarely does and moves to the shoreline. He can walk only on his back paws, which is useful for carrying things. He just lives in an environment where he usually needs all his paws to balance and move properly; it is _easier_ to climb with all his paws on uneven surfaces and that is how he prefers to move. But it is only a little way.

On the edge of the waves he crouches to the ground and bows _Majesty_ to the king, who turns away from the hatchlings now all fighting one dead claw bigger than all of them " they may yet win " and meets his eyes.

Hiccup closes those eyes momentarily, overwhelmed, but takes courage from Toothless who has accompanied him as always and lets the king look into him and see his request.

It is one he has asked before, it was part of the plan if they got this far, but he needs to be sure, because it is a dangerous thing, a mad thing. It is a _Tt-(click)-th-phuh-ss_ thing.

**Yes.**

The young dragon shudders at the power of it and then sighs when the shakes have gone away, both relieved and afraid all over again. But he lifts his eyes and his paws and his heart and his mind and

everything he is to Toothless, who embraces him and is both him and his.

Then, from his dragon-love's back where he belongs and will always belong, Hiccup cries out to his family, calling them to him.

They have one last battle to win.

* * *

><p>To be continued.

20. Chapter 20

ON WITH THE SHOW!

**Nightfall,**** Part Twenty**

Always before Stoick has fought off raids and killed dragons and defended his people with the face of his wife and the thought of his son held before his eyes, driving him to protect their memories and all that they mean to him, everything he has ever fought for.

And now dragons have taken even that from him, just as they have taken everything else. Now the image of Valka has a human shadow cast over her and blood across her face, now the baby has grown up into a dragon himself, and instead Stoick can see the furious flash of those green eyes every time he swings his warhammer and makes contact with dragon-scales, because every strike is one more reason his own son would hate him.

He fights on, because there is nothing else he can do, but there is no longer any joy in it. Now there are only the hard dry bones of necessity. He must protect his people, he must keep them alive through one more winter, and he will not let dragons steal that from them as they have taken everything else from him.

Thieves, thieves! Stoick rages coldly as his hammer shudders in his hands against a Gronkle's thick ribs. It reels backwards, nearly rolling over on its stubby legs, and the Viking chief hammers at it as if he can rebuild his life and his world with its shattered bones. Thieves of food and lives and children and all that had ever made _sense_ in his world!

He cannot give up or stop or surrender â€" there are too many people depending on him. But for the first time in his life Stoick is losing the desire to fight.

All he has left is hatred, and even that is dull and cold, just like hammer blows. There is fire all around him, but he is frozen inside with the ice that had filled his soul when he saw love and belonging in his son's eyes and it was directed at a dragon.

But beyond the fire and outside the ice there are people depending on him. There are children who have learned all their short lives that they will grow up to fight dragons and defend the village just like their parents, and they have not run from the fight or the cold or the hunger, they have stayed and been loyal. Those parents have never wavered, and they look to Stoick with faith that he will lead them

even against overwhelming odds and raids that never stop coming and only get worse.

So how could he ever even consider surrender?

Filling his other hand with an axe that someone has dropped â€" there is blood on the haft as well as the blade, and he cannot spare the time to wonder who it had belonged to and if that warrior still lives â€" Stoick roars back at the beasts that plague his village and his life and chops into the nearest foot full of dragon-claws, which lift and swipe at him in the smoke. _Nadder_, part of him notes, just like the creature that Astrid had been playing with in the pit.

Astrid, of all people! Playing with dragons! Have they taken _her_ from him as well? Now even she is inextricably linked with the beasts in his mind, and every thought of dragons hurts because how can he endure in a world where _dragon_ has come to evoke _son_ and _son_ means only _never_? Nowhere is safe from them, and nothing.

"No!" Stoick shouts at the blue-purple, smoke-smeared dragon, which thinks better of trying to bite him when his hammer slams into its large nose. He hurls his denial â€" of it, of everything it represents â€" after it as it flees.

He will not give up hope even if they have taken everything else. He still has people to protect and enemies to kill; he has pride in those people who never give up.

Stoick will not be the first chief in three hundred years of war to lose Berk to dragons because he was too weak to survive the loss of a child.

But still they come, again and again.

A strange thing had happened some time ago â€" Stoick does not know how long, but it had been in what should have been the cold clear hours long after midnight but well before sunrise, and through the smoke it might be almost morning now. For a moment the battle had stopped, dragons had stopped fighting back and had taken off into the sky, circling and crying out in their many discordant voices.

Was it possible? Stoick had wondered at the time. Had they given up so easily?

"Something's wrong," Astrid had said, looking up at them with puzzlement. "They're scared. Confused."

He is not entirely pleased that she has gotten to know dragons so well. What business does she have caring about what they think or do? They are the enemy â€" the Vikings _know_ what dragons do. They raid, they steal, they burn, they kill â€" why would they be afraid now when they never have been before? The Vikings certainly hadn't done anything different, they were only barely holding their ground, and if it's not something they can use, does it matter?

The raiding dragons had faltered and almost broken, hovering uncertainly. Some of them had winged away, but then they had turned around and come back, and whatever had changed evidently didn't change enough, because the raiders had dived back at the village, screaming.

They had sounded almost frightened, almost desperate, and the attack had suddenly gotten more unpredictable and much worse.

The Vikings understand dragon attacks. Dragons steal food. But these aren't doing that anymore.

Oh, they are snatching anything they can get their claws or jaws on, but they are also smashing through buildings that don't have any food in them, burning the empty ground and the sky, screaming at Vikings without attacking and then flying away only to return and hover and flail at nothing.

It was almost like a battle with another tribe that Stoick had once fought in, when they had been fighting each other for days over a ship both sides wanted, and then a fire arrow had gone astray and the thing had burned to the waterline anyway. But they had been fighting for so long that they didn't care anymore, they didn't know what else they were supposed to be doing, so they had just pounded at each other until they were exhausted.

The dragons are acting like that. They take mouthfuls of fish and kill sheep and then carry them off into the sky and stay there, hovering and screaming in anger or confusion or whatever it is that dragons think about. They knock people over and then run straight past them.

Has every bloody dragon in the world gone _completely mad?_

And does Stoick care?

That they won't retreat just gives his people more of a chance to kill as many dragons as they can so that there will be fewer to plague them in the future.

It's not a raid anymore, he notes grimly as the sky begins to lighten at last.

It's a siege. It's a fight to the death.

So be it, and Stoick roars a battle cry and charges with his people behind him.

If they cannot find the nest to kill the dragons, then let the nest come to them!

He sees Gobber trying to aim that cursed catapult, and half-hopes that dragons will burn it to the ground before it brings any more chaos into his life. But they won't go near it, and Gobber is using the gap in the fighting to make further modifications to it even as he fights, switching out complex smith's tools for battle-axe from moment to moment.

A number of his Vikings have cornered a Zippleback, and even a dragon with two heads cannot bite at them all at once. An explosion of poison gas knocks them away, but it is only a small blast, and the creature must be almost out of fire, because its attackers are up on their feet and closing in on it again, and it cannot back away and cannot take off because Snotlout's oversized sword has pinned one wing to the ground. The arrogant young warrior makes a dramatic jump

for the sword hilt, dragging it down and cutting a bigger gash in the wing than before, and one of his friends throws a hammer at the closest head when it screams and tries to bite him.

Astrid goes down for a moment under the weight of a Gronkle, but she twists away and slams her axe into the side of its face, making it shake its head. It has her pinned, though, and even though she is continuing to attack it, the stocky dragon does not do the sensible thing and flee " but it does not burn her to ashes, either.

Across the village, an older woman whose name he could remember if her features weren't hidden in a war helmet covered in blood looses an arrow that punches into a Nadder that is hovering uncertainly, as if it does not know what to do with the struggling sheep in its claws. The pain makes it drop the animal, which flees for its unexpectedly spared life.

The whole village reeks of blood and fire and the smoke being blown around in the wind, of dragon-scales and human sweat and fear.

This is all going wrong. Usually dragons strike and flee with what they can find. What is wrong with these creatures? It's as if they don't know what they're doing anymore.

"Someone fetch more bows!" Stoick commands as the sun continues to come up and it gets easier to see their targets. Any Vikings not currently locked in combat run to obey his bellowed orders. "Make sure everyone has arrows or can get to them!"

He squints up at the brightening sky. Even that is not driving the dragons away.

So be it. They will continue to fight.

"We fight for as long as it takes!" the chief roars to his battered people. "Courage! And victory!"

When over a hundred throats shout _Victory!_ back to him he takes courage from them. Dragons cannot take his people's bravery and resolve from them, so Stoick will not let them take that resolve from him.

Then the sky darkens anew.

Along with every other head in the war-torn village, Stoick's eyes turn upwards again. What he sees almost destroys that reclaimed courage.

The sky over Berk is filled with dragons, fresh and new to the fight.

"No!" Stoick breathes, but no one can hear his despair over the screams of the monsters in the sky, which fold their wings and plunge towards the battlefield, descending on Vikings and wrenching weapons from their hands. It is such a strange thing for dragons to do that the humans are not ready for it, and a number of them are disarmed and being screamed at before they know what is going on.

Does anyone know what is going on? Stoick doesn't. Nothing makes sense, and he cannot even decide which order he should shout, even if

anyone could hear him.

Dragons are shrieking and crying out and roaring as if they are going to bring down Berk with noise alone, at each other and at Vikings and possibly at the sky, a deafening cacophony of hateful dragon noises and animal rage.

But then, staring upward, Stoick hears none of it.

His world focuses down to the creature right before his eyes, and for a moment he does not believe it is real. Surely not. It cannot be.

Not here.

Not now.

Not after all this time.

He has truly never forgotten the flat-nosed dragon with the wide ruff and the four wings and the lethal claws that had wrapped around Valka and his son and taken them away from Stoick forever. He has dreamed of the firelight in its golden eyes and the snarl of its fangs.

And here it is at last, hovering above and snarling at the more familiar dragons, all its wings spread and its body exposed and vulnerable in the breaking sunlight.

Stoick forgets everything else. This is what he has waited twenty years for, the hope of this chance is what he has staunched his wounds with, and the fire of hatred is what has kept him warm in nights that are too cold and too long and too empty.

The beast that took his wife to her death and nurtured his son's madness, the dragon he hates more than anything, is here. Nothing will make him miss this chance for revenge.

Coldly, focused and determined, Stoick reaches out and catches a woman who is running past him with a bow in her hands. It's a longbow not quite as tall as she is, and she has already gotten an arrow half-notched to the string.

It is not as thick a bolt as a crossbow would fire, but it will be sharp enough to at least bring the beast down.

Perhaps she sees the look in his eyes, perhaps she can hear the deafening hatred that is roaring through Stoick's skull, drowning out everything â€" the screams of dragons from above and all around, the shouts of his people, the waves and the wind, the hungry crackle of fires still burning, even the painful memory of joy in a feral child's eyes and voice â€" but she surrenders the bow and arrow to him and backs away.

None of it matters. Nothing but the arrow, and the taut string between his fingers, and the tension in it as he draws the arrow back to his cheek and narrows his eyes to aim.

Gods, give him only this. Let him avenge his family's blood against this creature and he will never ask for anything again.

He lets the arrow fly, carrying all his rage and loss and grief with it to poison the beast from within " let it suffer as he has all these years! " and the song of the bowstring is almost as clear and sweet as the one in his heart as the sounds of his world return to him.

The arrow will fly true " he can see that it will even as he fires " and he snarls a terrible smile as he watches it shriek towards the red-gold dragon.

And then something else shrieks over Stoick's head, an inhuman and familiar noise that cuts through everything else, sound and chaos and confusion and rage alike.

Something dark and swift streaks after the arrow, like night slicing through the morning sky.

Stoick barely has time to feel his jaw drop " whether to shout or just to stare he does not know, and what he might have said he knows even less " before the Night Fury twists around to look back at the dumb-struck archer, snapping to an impossible midair halt moments before it would have collided with the four-winged dragon, which only now turns its attention to it " and to its rider, who Stoick likewise cannot take his eyes off, seeing that rider as never before.

On the black dragon's back, high above but close enough to see, Hiccup brandishes the captured arrow in one dragon-clawed hand and screams, a dragon's sound, furious and exhilarated. There is blood on his face and a brighter red both; there are ashes on his skin but fire in his eyes, and he and the Fury move as if he belongs in the air as much as the dragon and more.

The Night Fury roars with him, both of them together defiant and triumphant at once.

The Viking chieftain cannot breathe with the shock of it, the surprise of seeing a son he never expected to see again, and never like this.

He remembers an infant born too soon, small enough to be held in a single hand as it cried so weakly; he remembers a large-eyed baby that stared at him and through him in bafflement; he remembers the dream-child he had constructed from his people's children and his own wishes; he remembers a figure with his mother's face and a dragon's voice, with frightened and furious eyes full of hatred.

And now there is this.

This is no scared child, no grounded castaway, no lost soul.

This is a warrior in his own right and in his own element, faster than an arrow and fearless as a dragon.

As his father watches in absolute disbelief, Hiccup throws his head back and roars.

When the dragons all around him take up the sound, Stoick cannot tell his voice from the others.

In an instant, on some cue the chief cannot see, the Night Fury folds its wings and slices its tail through the air, and the pair dart away, disappearing into the scrimmage of dragons above, cutting and diving and dodging easily through them all with perfect confidence.

Stoick blinks, remembers to close his mouth, and looks again at the dragons all around.

The newcomers, unfamiliar and strange and exotic, are fighting the raiders.

They roar at the attacking dragons and strike muzzles and bodies with wings and tails, pushing the ones that can fly away from the ground and those that can't because of wounds away from the Vikings. But at the same time other strangers dive to the island and shove Vikings away from dragons. They snatch weapons from humans, flying the stolen blades and bows and bola up into the sky and dropping them into the ocean or onto cliffs. They are quick, and the Vikings are so surprised by this new strategy and the unfamiliar opponents that they never learned to fight that the dragons are taking quite a lot of warriors out of the battle " without doing much harm at all.

Looking for that black shadow as he is, and completely forgetting to track the red-gold thief that has disappeared in the chaos in the sky anyway, Stoick turns to follow it as it bowls over the Gronkle still locked in combat with Astrid, separating the fighters, and thinks he can hear dragon and rider scream together at both Viking woman and dragon before taking off into the sky again.

Similar scenes are taking place across the village. The newcomers haven't joined the fight. They are breaking it up.

As dragons scream at dragons but do not attack, fight them off but do no harm, as Vikings lower weapons in puzzlement rather than having them wrenched from their hands, as strange dragons separate lifelong enemies, as everything changes, the raid is coming to a halt.

One way or another, this fight is over.

"Enough!" Stoick finally finds his voice. "Weapons down! Stand down!" His people are looking at him for guidance, but for once in his life he has none to give, and he can only shake his head. Any control he had over this situation has been taken from his hands, and he is at the mercy of the newcomers as much as anyone else.

"To me!"

Baffled, confused, lost, his warriors, his people, obey. They gather around their chief as if they are going to be attacked again at any moment and they will have to make a final stand, the sort of thing that is triumphant in songs and stories but is, Stoick realizes, incredibly horrifying in real life. All he can do is shake his head whenever someone tries to ask him what's going on, and eventually people stop asking. The remaining weapons bristle outward and the light of battle-madness still flickers in some eyes; they are still besieged even if the besiegers have changed, but they remain warriors in defense of their home.

Silently, Astrid makes her way to his side, looking up at him in confusion. He has no answers for her, but they will protect their people together.

Above, dragons are still arguing with each other, but it no longer looks like a war. The strangers are all mixed together with the dragons the humans have been fighting all their lives, snarling and gesturing with their claws and glaring. It's a tangled and meaningless racket, but whatever it is must be very important.

And then they go almost quiet, screams dying away and dragons hovering in midair, holding their positions, the newcomers staying between humans and raiders as if keeping them apart.

One dives from the sky, bounding to a landing in an open space in the center of the village.

The Night Fury stalks towards the massed Vikings, tail lashing and head high, teeth showing just a bit, just enough to remind them that it bites quite hard despite the name its rider calls it.

Its rider, whose eyes are fixed on Stoick as they approach together, is still holding the arrow he snatched from the air to protect a dragon.

He has everyone's attention, and he knows it. His eyes are as hard as the dragon's and as full of the exhilaration of battle, his head as high. There is blood smeared across his face, some of it dark dragon blood and some of it dried from a gash in his overlong hair, which is windswept and tangled. There are stripes of red " is it paint? " across his skin and the dragon's scales alike. They look as if they have been through a war, and won it.

The black dragon stops out of reach of any weapons, and father and son stare at each other. The space between them might as well be an ocean, and only the flapping of dragon wings and the sound of the wind and the waves from the sunlit harbor below can be heard " Stoick thinks the people behind him might be holding their breath, waiting to see what he will do.

Then Hiccup holds out the arrow in both hands, parallel to the ground.

Finally, finally, Hiccup has a human word where all the sounds come naturally, that he can say perfectly clearly.

"Stop!" he cries, and snaps the arrow in two.

The sound of it is echoed by what sounds like the whole village gasping at once. Stoick thinks he might have been among them.

The dragon rider spreads his clawed hands and drops the two halves of the arrow, which clatter to the trampled-hard earth. "Drakkkn chfff dead," he says brokenly. "Stop."

Before Stoick can even begin to figure out what that means, the Night Fury rears to its hind legs, wings flaring out, and they scream together at the dragons all around.

Was there silence? Stoick can no longer remember silence in the face

of what must be an entire flock of dragons roaring all at once. Are they repeating the same thing?

In response, the familiar raiders cry out back at them, bowing heads and closing eyes even as they fly.

And as the strangers scatter, parting to let them pass, they dive, settling to the ground all around the village, roosting on the cliffs and on top of whatever buildings and ramps are still standing unburned, out of the reach of Vikings but not attacking.

Looking back from this unbelievable sight, Stoick sees the look in his impossible son's eyes " and the identical expression in those of the dragon he loves so dearly.

It's triumph.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Astrid follow his gaze.

"It's over," she breathes. "Oh my gods, chief—the war. It's over. They won."

Hiccup is watching all the fighting not going on as dragons and Vikings look at each other suspiciously and doubtfully, but at the sound of her voice he looks around and meets her eyes.

She recoils just a little at the intensity in that dragon-green gaze.

And then he shrieks with what is clearly laughter, and dragon and rider leap into the air, banking for a moment above Berk and its people and then scorching around the entire place through confused dragons and above equally confused humans who are spreading out from their besieged cluster, starting to tend wounds and put out fires despite the dragons all around.

They fly together unbelievably fast and tumbling through the air with clear exhilaration.

No " they do so in celebration.

* * *

><p>Astrid is numb with shock and shaking with the rush of battle and the strangeness of what has just happened " what has happened? She's still not sure. She knows that the sky had filled with dragons " she had heard them even if she didn't have time to look " and then the Gronkle she'd been trying to fight off had been abruptly knocked away from her.<p>

She'd looked up from the ground to find her vision filled with familiar dark scales, and part of her had registered
Toothless?

Looking past him to keep track of her enemy, she had seen the Gronkle rolling back to its feet and crouching submissively under the gaze of the black dragon " and his rider, who had glanced back at her and screamed something incomprehensible and angry, almost as if he had been scolding her, but Toothless had been making the same sounds at the stocky smaller dragon.

What in Hel's forsaken realm were they doing here? It made no sense. Hiccup had fled, he had escaped them and left them behind, he had refused to help them and rejected humans utterly.

No sooner had Astrid tried to get to her feet than they were gone again, buffeting her in the downdraft from Toothless' wide-spread wings as they leapt and disappeared into the sky.

Only then had she seen the new dragons breaking up the battle. It was made ever stranger by the fact that breaking up fights is so often Astrid's job around here, so she recognized exactly what they were doing.

And now, as a war that has lasted three hundred blood-soaked and starving years ends at the command of a man who is mostly a dragon, she tries to run after them, at least to keep them in sight, not caring who sees her do so because all the rules have changed today. She watches with amazement as they dive and flip and soar effortlessly, crying out that delighted laughter for all the sky to hear. This is what had been missing from Hiccup's eyes as he cowered on that beach, ignoring her and fearing her, this is what he had been waiting to regain while she pestered him.

Flight, and freedom, and now they are fearless together. She had seen them powerless and frightened; now she sees them alive.

For a minute they fly aimlessly, joyously, and then something catches their attention, and they go from playing in the sky to a midair charge as swift and sure as any arrow.

Somewhere up the cliffs on the edges of the village, there's an explosion, repeated several times.

Heads snap up and look around at the noise, and all across the village shoulders drop and hands go to weapons as eyes go wide "has everything started all over again?"

But Astrid has kept her eyes on the rejoicing pair, and she tracks the sound to the dragon pit, and the cloud of dragons now flying out of the smoke rising from it and into the air, shrieking down the slope to join the wild ones, chattering and purring and crooning and crying out in what might be amazement at their newfound freedom.

"It's all right!" Astrid tries to assure her people even if she is not sure of that herself, as even more dragons fill Berk. "It's all right! No weapons! Leave them alone!"

She would say more, but then something bowls into her and sends her flying. She has the wit and the reflexes to drop her axe before she cuts her own head off with it, tumbling and trying to bring her fall under control.

A dizzying second later, she's flat on her back on the ground and staring up into blue scales and golden eyes.

Stormfly tips her head to one side to get the Viking woman out of her blind spot and chatters excitedly, cheerfully, and makes no attempt to bite or claw at her.

Astrid gapes, then feels her face decide to start smiling without asking her mind about it. "Hello," she says, reaching up a hand to pet the dragon's nose. "Let me up?" She gestures the same command, a series of small pushes away from herself, and to her amazement Stormfly backs up and lets her get to her feet. But the moment she's there the blue dragon pokes her overlarge nose into Astrid's body, nuzzling at her and still chattering.

Petting the happy dragon and at the same time encouraging the people who look to her that everything is under control even though none of it is under her control, Astrid looks around at the sound of a particular set of wings.

Toothless alights in an open space as dragons move away to let him land, and the man on his shoulders stares at her directly as he had always been reluctant to do before, meeting her eyes with confidence and a clear challenge in that gaze.

"Wow," says Astrid, for lack of anything else to say. "You came back. Look at you!"

Hiccup grins at her, an expression with too many teeth to be entirely a smile.

"What's all this?" she asks, spreading her hands to indicate the chaos of a human village filled with dragons and none of them fighting each other at the moment. Stormfly objects to the removal of the petting hand and pursues it, bumping the hand with her nose until Astrid relents and decides to only use one hand for gestures in the future. "You brought more dragons? Why?"

How much of that he understands she's not sure, but the dragon rider raises a clawed hand and points down into the harbor, shrieking out a proud and fearless cry.

Once again, the other dragons follow his lead, and all attention turns to the harbor, where â€œ

Something is moving. Waves are rolling up and flooding the docks, and ships toss and buck at anchor and fight their moorings as water parts and something too big to contemplate emerges from the sea.

It is a mountain, it is a giant; it is a leviathan of dragons, with deep-set eyes that are almost a human blue and two long and lethal tusks with scratches etched into the bone. A great white frill behind its head makes its face even bigger and when it raises that head and opens its mouth to roar it isn't even a sound; it is a physical thing that strikes them all, human and dragon, like a blow, like the voice of the god of thunder made manifest.

The leviathan rises from the harbor and places one paw that might fit into the whole destroyed dragon pit on one of the cliffs leading up to the village, leaning on it to look down at Berk.

Huge does not even begin to describe it. The creature fills the world, like a glacier that has come to visit.

Beside her, Hiccup says "Drakkkn chfff," quite happily, with loyalty and satisfaction in his voice.

When Astrid can tear her eyes away from the colossus towering over them, she sees rider and dragon bowing together, a single movement that should look awkward but is not because they do it completely as one, heads down and eyes closing, crouching before the chief of dragons.

But she can still see that triumphant half-smirk on Hiccup's face. He may not even know he is doing so, she realizes, but this is his doing and he is very pleased with it.

All across the village, dragons do likewise, bowing and crouching in submission; beside her, Stormfly lowers her head, half-closes her eyes, and burbles softly. The Viking woman is half-tempted to do the same, because this is not something they could ever fight. It could wipe the village from the island with a single blow.

Still, from somewhere among the shattered buildings, she can hear Gobber say, quite clearly, "I'm goin' ta need a bigger axe."

She desperately hopes he is joking.

The chief of dragons fixes its eyes on the dragons scattered around the village and calls to them, a low but enormous sound that shakes buildings and teeth and souls. It's not the all-powerful roar of before, but it is still overwhelming.

Strangers and former raiders alike take off from their perches, swarming into the air and spiraling around the leviathan's head in a single flock, crying out to it in their many voices.

"Uh strrrr_tt_," Hiccup says in his broken Norse. She turns away from the impossible sight to see him watching her.

"Drakkkn kkko chfff."

"They're going away?" she asks incredulously, getting used to his odd pronunciation all over again. "They're going with your chief?"

He thinks over her words, head tipped to one side as he works through them, and then nods. "Isss."

Astrid is at a loss for words. "Gods of fire and thunder," she says, just until she can think of something else. "You did it. You actually did it."

In the harbor, the great leviathan, the chief of dragons, backs away, retreating out to sea "not because it is afraid, she can tell, but because it is easier to be there. It sinks to a crouch that more than fills the harbor, tail flipping out of the deeper waves every so often, and patiently looks up at the dragons that fly around it, seemingly content just to wait and watch.

The Vikings are not in control of this situation at all. _That_ is.

But then it's done more in a few minutes than they've achieved in three hundred years, so Astrid finds that she doesn't mind at all.

She misses Hiccup and Toothless' departure because it's then that her people start coming to her again, wondering what's going on and desperate for answers and reassurance.

The sun is much, much higher in the sky once she finishes explaining over and over again, to people who have been fighting dragons all their lives and who expected to die fighting dragons, that it's all right, that the war is over, that the dragons aren't going to raid anymore, they're going to go with the chief of dragons, that no it's not dangerous and really what could they do about it if it was?

That for the first time in forever it's going to be all right.

Dragons fly out to perch on the chief of dragons and talk at it, and some of them fly back to the island and some of them fly away back the way that dragons have always fled, maybe back to the nest. Stormfly returns to follow Astrid around, clucking accompaniment whenever she says something, so that the Viking woman reassures her people with a dragon echoing her.

And of course the Terrible Terrors pick now to swarm in and join the fun now that there is no more screaming going on except for what might be hundreds of dragons all talking to each other and the humans beginning to realize that this is something to celebrate even though it's new and unheard of and very, very strange, so Astrid finds herself called on to calm that down as well. She's not sure she really achieves much more than scaring Terrors into the air, where they fly around and scream happily just because everyone else is happy.

Confused, and a little lost, but not fighting for their lives right at this moment, so it'll do.

* * *

><p>It's probably an hour or so before she finds Hiccup again, and she's quite amused when she does so.<p>

And it has nothing to do with the bit of argument she'd overheard as she searched for him.

"Hey," Tuffnut is pestering Snotlout, "you said he was ten feet tall."

"And could breathe fire," his twin is backing him up. "Why isn't he breathing fire? That would be awesome. I want to breathe fire!"

The twins sometimes have annoyingly good memories for people who don't understand that jumping off something might have something to do with hitting the ground immediately afterwards, which is sometimes quite fun to watch from a safe distance when they're not her problem. And Snotlout clearly hates them both all over again as they call him out on his bragging, but that's nothing new.

And then there's Gobber, who stops her to say, "Ye may not want to e'er mention to Stoick tha' when Berk was finally conquered by dragons, t'was his own son leadin' the charge."

Eventually she runs into Fishlegs. He's sitting on the wreckage of a

destroyed building with his copy of the _Book of Dragons_ in his lap and charcoal all over his hands and face as he tries to write down everything about all the new dragons he can see, especially the giant just offshore, scribbling furiously and talking to himself excitedly, tripping over his own words and writing in every blank space he can find. Fortunately, he'd added some more pages while they were trying to work with the pit dragons, because they kept finding more and more things that the original _Book of Dragons_ had just gotten wrong, and Fishlegs is trying to draw all the new species filling their sky in those empty pages.

"Having fun?" she asks with a grin.

He looks up at her with absolute delight, practically glowing, like Valkyries have turned up to take him to Valhalla and personally present him with a special _Book of Dragons_. "Look at that thing! Just look at it!" he says enthusiastically. "I don't even have a class for that! It is _all_ tens! I'm going to need more numbers! â€|or change all the old ones, I supposeâ€|"

As he flips through pages to see which ones he would have to renumber, a movement from the rubble behind him catches Astrid's eye.

There's a cross-beam that originally belonged to the roof of the building extending behind and above Fishlegs' head, and as Astrid watches, Hiccup edges out onto it, looking with fascination at the papers full of drawings in the young Viking's hands.

He still moves tentatively, but it's not so much fear now as the tension and interest of a predator stalking prey, shoulders hunched with attention and eyes wide, lips parted in what might be an amazed smile.

Astrid is tempted to laugh, but doesn't â€" part of her still thinks he'll bolt if she breathes at him wrong. Still, after a moment, Fishlegs notices the look on her face.

"No, really!" he insists. "It's not funny! We've been wrong about so â€" what?"

"Whatever you do," she warns him, "don't move."

He freezes obediently. "Is there a dragon behind me?"

"Uhâ€|you might say so. Okay â€" turn around slowly."

Fishlegs looks over his shoulder and then up. His eyes go big enough to roll away.

"Hello," he says, voice thin and high with excitement. "What are you doing up there?"

Astrid elbows him. "I told you, he likes to draw. He's looking at your book full of dragon pictures."

She will have to think much better of Fishlegs in the future â€" he looks at his precious copy of the _Book of Dragons_, stares up at the dragonish creature perched above him with as much interest as Hiccup is directing at the papers, and then holds it out to him.

"Want to see?" Fishlegs asks.

Hiccup's head goes up with surprise and he makes that chattering hunting sound, reaching down for the book but clearly reluctant to take it from human hands â€" he keeps pulling back and trying again.

"Put it down," Astrid suggests as several Terrors fly overhead, being chased by a pack of children, but everyone involved seems to be having fun.

"Oh, right." Fishlegs clambers over to a neutral spot in the rubble, leaves the papers somewhere Hiccup can get to, and then retreats back to the ground.

To his delight, the dragon rider leaps for it like it's going to get away, sending debris flying but keeping his balance effortlessly, snatching up the papers.

He figures it out in no time flat, opening it upside-down at first but then reversing it so that the dragons are the right way up, investigating the binding that sews the pages together, and pulling off one clawed glove with his teeth and holding it there so he can turn the pages without damaging them, making crooning noises of delight through that mouthful of leather as he curls up to look at it.

Astrid can see Fishlegs' fingers twitching, clearly dying to take notes on the whole new kind of dragon right before him, but to his credit he manages not to shout. Or maybe he's just choking on all the questions he has and not knowing which to ask first because asking any of them would mean he's not asking all the others.

Fairly soon Hiccup comes across the picture of the Night Fury that Fishlegs had adapted into the book from one of the dragon rider's own drawings, and he lights up anew and drops the glove to cry, "Tt-th-ss!" He turns the page towards them and grins a dragon's grin, showing teeth and purring, before returning to his examination of it.

"Wow, wow, wow," Fishlegs mutters, amazed. Astrid wonders if she's going to have to grab him to stop him from climbing up there and interrogating Hiccup, who probably would not like that. She also waves off some villagers who have spotted more free entertainment and have come to watch.

But instead he calls out, "Hiccup? Right?"

Hiccup peeks over the top of the book at the sound of his name.

"You keep it."

He tips his head to one side again in confusion â€" he may not recognize the words.

But he's interacting with actual humans beyond Astrid, so she has to encourage this, even if she's amazed that Fishlegs would be willing to give up his favorite possession. Other Vikings have axes and fishing spears â€" Fishlegs has a book.

"You'll have to show him," she tells Fishlegs. "He really doesn't talk very well."

"Oh. Okay. Umâ€¦" Fishlegs thinks about it. He points to the book, then at Hiccup. Then he closes his fists and hides them behind his back.

The dragon rider startles, movements still more dragon than human. He looks at the book in his hands, one dragon-clawed and one not, and makes that chattering noise again.

But then he pulls the stray gauntlet back on, picks up the book, and leaps back to the half-burnt rafter, where he shakes his head no and drops the pages so that Fishlegs can get them back without having to get too close.

"Why not?" Fishlegs asks him, and Hiccup probably understands the curious note in his voice.

Perched on the beam, Hiccup grimaces, thinking, then gestures at the papers, says "ffsssh" and makes a fairly good imitation of water splashing, says "drakkkn" and then makes noises like breathing fire.

"Oh! I get it! It would get ruined. Right."

But something else catches Hiccup's attention and he turns away, scrambling across the destroyed building and vanishing behind it for a brief moment, only to reappear momentarily on Toothless' back as they take off and fly somewhere else.

Astrid slaps Fishlegs on the back in a congratulatory fashion. "Nice work," she says, and it's not sarcastic at all.

He turns to her with a humongous smile, Book of Dragons cradled in his hands. "That was the greatest thing ever!"

* * *

><p>"You," Stoick says, his voice betraying the ice locked up inside him.

His people have all wandered off and are beginning to celebrate, but the presence of the red-gold dragon thief is like rot in grain â€" it poisons the entire barrel.

It is perched on one of the battle torches, burned out now, broad-finned tail wrapped around the pole and its wide head looking out to sea where that colossus â€" a chief of dragons, he has heard Astrid telling people now â€" is lurking and calling the dragons to it.

At his challenge, its head rotates almost all the way around to look over its shoulder and down at the coldly furious Viking chief, the only human in sight.

"You took Valka from me," he snarls. "You took my son from me."

It flares its ruff and wings and hisses at him, spinning its head

back around. Stoick will climb up there himself " or chop it down at the base, more likely " if he has to, but before he can do so the creature comes swarming down headfirst, using the claws on the ends of its wings to grip the torch and make its way to the ground.

Once there, it rears up, spreading those wings and hissing a rattling, hostile sound, glaring at Stoick balefully and then lowering itself to the ground as if to stalk him.

But he refuses to be intimidated " the only dragon that has ever frightened Stoick was the one in the eyes of his own son, and this thing owes him blood for that too. "My wife " my Val " is dead because of you!" he growls.

He has put his hammer down for the moment with no battle going on and people to reassure and debris to clear away, but right here and now he feels as if he doesn't need the weapon. He will take this thing down with his bare hands if he has to. He has fought dragons empty-handed before, and he has won, and he did not hate those nearly as much as he does this one.

"I could have protected her!" he shouts. "I could have protected _him!_ I would have raised my son to be a good man and not a wild thing! I loved my wife as the best of us all that she was, and she would still be here if you hadn't taken Valka from her home, from her people, from _me!_ You took her off into the wilds to die! _You killed her!_"

The dragon recoils, and maybe it had understood that, because it screams back at him.

It has no _right_ to have so much pain in its voice, and Stoick moves on it with his fists clenched and his teeth bared. He knows that he could restart the whole war with a single punch, but here and now his pain is too great for reason.

He doesn't get close enough to strike before a shadow dives between the two of them from the roof of a nearby building.

The Night Fury slews around and spreads its wings to separate Viking and dragon, snarling at Stoick. From its back, the man who should have been Stoick's son and not a dragon growls with it, slicing a gauntleted hand through the air.

"Nuh!" Hiccup commands in his garbled Norse. He clicks and whistles the unintelligible sound that must be the dragon's name, and adds a noise that might mean "good" somewhere in there " Stoick can hear the _uudt_ part of it, and that Hiccup reinforces it with "nuh bad!" all but confirms it.

The Viking chief is left standing with his hands balled into fists and rage trying to melt the ice in his heart and only managing to flood him with hatred. "Hiccup," he growls, "that creature got your mother " my Valka " killed."

From his place on the black dragon's shoulders, those green eyes go wide and horrified. "Nuh!" he objects, shaking his head wildly and making his hair fly. "_uh-ufffff_ mama! _(click)-shhh-prrrr_ mama hrrt! _Pfikingr_ mama dead."

The reminder hurts almost as much as the presence of the thief Stoick has hated for twenty years. "No," he denies in his turn.

Hiccup glares at his father as stubborn, Stoick realizes painfully, as his mother.

Mutely, he flicks at the riding harness on the Night Fury, freeing himself, and on some wordless signal Stoick cannot see, the black dragon retreats a few steps, closer to the thief they are protecting. The creature finally looks away from the Viking threatening it and turns its face down to look at the pair.

The almost-human rider reaches up his clawed hands, meeting its eyes.

It lowers one of those claws on the end of its wings to him, and he leaps to the proffered limb, climbing readily and easily across the living dragon to end up on its shoulder, crouched and poised to pounce in its defense. He turns to it and rubs their faces together affectionately, making an audibly happy purring sound, before returning his attention to his father and preparing to spring, purr seamlessly becoming a growl. The Night Fury sits down beside them and bares its teeth, tail lashing.

For an endless moment, Stoick is trapped between choices. He can avenge his wife's death on the dragon that stole her from him, which is what he has dreamed of for so many years. But it is a dragon his son loves and protects, and he will probably restart a war even as he alienates his only child forever.

Or he can lower his fists and set aside his vengeance.

For years, Stoick had asked himself what Valka would do. Now he can no longer remember when did he stop doing that?

In the end, the look in his son's eyes, as hard as flint and with as much potential fire in them, gives him no choice.

Unclenching his fists feels like letting a weapon fall to the ground in the face of all his enemies, but Stoick bows his head before what he knows Valka would have wanted a better way.

Here, at the end of the war, he surrenders. It is enough. He is tired.

With no one to see, for the first time in his life, he gives in.

On his knees before the dragons and his own son, empty hands spread out before him, he mourns for his wife, because he cannot even avenge her now.

No dragon fangs tear into him, no fire blasts him, and no claws rip him open.

Instead, he feels the lightest of touches on the palm of one hand.

Very, very slowly, Stoick looks up

into green eyes, tipped just a bit onto one side with curiosity and what could almost be compassion, over a leather glove held in his teeth.

Valka's son is crouched before him, balanced lightly and ready to spring away if he needs to, but with bare human fingers resting on his father's hand.

Hiccup purrs ever so slightly at him before retreating to his beloved dragon-companion, which nuzzles at him reassuringly " or perhaps he is reassuring the dragon " before they, and Valka's thief, fly away, leaving Stoick with his grief, but with a crack broken in it by just a little bit of hope.

Perhaps his son is not completely lost to him after all.

* * *

><p>By about noon or so, things have started to calm down somewhat, and Astrid is glad of it. Battle they know how to do; war they know how to do " living in a world where dragons dodge between houses and lurk on the edges of the village before flying back out to the leviathan in their bay rather than attacking? Going about their lives with dragon shadows all around? That's harder, especially as Stoick is walking around with a frozen look of shock in his eyes, hearing only part of what people say to him, so the Vikings keep coming to her instead.<p>

She has soothed fears and promised that the dragons will leave, although she suspects that some of them will stay.

And to her surprise Astrid doesn't actually mind that. As long as they're not attacking her people, they can do what they want.

Although she'll never admit to anyone that she might miss the Terrors. The children certainly would.

It's been a weird day, and Astrid could do with a break from Vikings. Stormfly has clearly had enough of them already, too. The Nadder is perched on the roof of Astrid's house, resting. Besides, as she looks around for the next fire to put out " real or imagined " a flicker of movement from one of the cliffs overlooking the village catches her eye.

When she looks a little closer she can see a long black tail flicking back and forth, draped over the edge of the cliff face.

Despite the mob of strange dragons everywhere, there's still only one jet-black one around, so Astrid ducks away from celebrating people " they have decided to treat this as a victory even though it's not so much winning as having their war taken away from them like troublesome children, and she thinks they're not wrong to do so " and makes her way up to that ledge.

She has something she needs to say.

Toothless and Hiccup are curled up together on the overhang, one of the ones the Vikings haven't built ramps to, although she thinks that this is actually one of the ones that should have a ramp but it's

been burnt down since and not yet replaced. Still, Astrid can get to it. She's just going to have to climb.

Neither dragon nor dragon-man â€" she truly can no longer think of him as a child, not with that light in his eyes and the blood and red paint still smeared across his face and the fact that he has shaken up her entire world â€" make any move to help her get there, but then they don't try to stop her, either. They simply watch her together as she scrambles from rock to rock. This is her home, her village. Anywhere they go here she can at least try to follow.

"You look pleased with yourself," she comments to Hiccup when she has her feet on somewhat more solid ground at last.

He really does; she's often seen him hide beneath Toothless' wing or curl up against the dragon's side, but now he's just leaning against his companion, lying on the ground in almost the same pose as the dragon, gauntleted hands loose and open on the rock before him. The black wing is wrapped around him like an arm around a comrade's shoulders, but he's not hiding anymore. They are both watching the village below, heads raised as if to smell the strong sea wind or listen to the calling of dragons swarming around their chief. Even from here it's enormous. Astrid just can't imagine something that big, even though she's looking right at it. It's like a moving, living island.

But while their bodies are relaxed, Astrid can see the fire in their eyes. They are happy; they are free; they have won a battle she didn't even know they were fighting, and she knows very well indeed the rush of a victory.

Astrid dares to sit down on the ground almost in arm's reach of them, and waits until she has their attention. It doesn't take long.

"I know you didn't do it for us," she says, honestly. With Hiccup, she doesn't have to pretend to have all the answers. "But thank you."

Out of habit, she reaches out a hand to him, but remembers and drops it, pulling away. "Sorry," she says, smiling slightly.

But to her surprise he sits up, reaches out, and snatches at that hand, catching it. It's awkward and rough and she almost feels like her hand is imprisoned in those claws, but he's being careful not to scratch her even though he clearly has no idea how to hold a human hand, and he's trying. He's confident enough in who he is and the protection and love of the dragon and their freedom to fly together â€" and perhaps whatever story is behind a garbled proclamation that a dragon chief was dead â€" that she's no longer a threat.

When he lets her go after only a moment and settles back into the dragon's embrace Astrid doesn't think she'll ever stop grinning.

"Stay," she says, impulsively. "Don't go. Stay with us."

Astrid doesn't know what's gotten into her.

"Your father wants you to stay â€" he really does love you, you know, even though you confuse him. And we could be friends. If you wanted.

You can tell any dragons that want to stay too that they can as long as they don't attack us." She knows that's too many words for him, can see the confusion in his eyes and that he's now watching her rather than listening, but she can't stop talking. "You could stay. You're human."

Hiccup laughs, a short mocking huff of breath, not the raucous exhilaration of triumph, at this last bit, and shakes his head _no_.

"Yes, you are." The last time she'd pushed this issue she'd gotten a permanent scar under her eye, but she thinks he's in too good a mood this time to take it out on her.

Dragons must roll their eyes quite often, because Hiccup has certainly learned to do that expression quite well.

He sits up again, although he'd clearly much prefer to keep lying on the ground, pulls off his gloves and shows her his calloused and scarred hands.

"Oooo-mn," he hums.

"Yes."

No, he indicates again, and taps two bare fingers between his eyes, over that deliberate line of red paint like blood, and then places the same hand on his chest over his heart. "Drakkkn," he tells her.

"Oh," says Astrid, moved quite against her will. Because Vikings can argue with anything, but how can she argue with that?

"I see. You're only human on the outside. You have a dragon's mind, and a dragon's heart."

This he understands, and his face lights up in a laugh. "Drakkknhrirt," he agrees, putting the two words together to make something new as he pulls the gauntlets back on.

Then, to her surprise, he rises to his feet properly â€" he really is taller than she'd thought â€" and lifts his face to the sky, letting the strong sea breeze blow his hair off his face, smiling that dragon-smile in pure joy.

And then he dashes past her, a couple of quick steps, and dives from the cliff.

Astrid screams involuntarily, scrambling for the edge to look for him, shocked and frightened for him â€"

Except he can _fly_.

She has seen the folds of leather on the back of his armor and has assumed that they were a cloak, for warmth or to keep predators from grabbing him by giving them mouthfuls of something other than skin to tear into.

But they're not anything quite so human and rational: they're wings, and Astrid bursts into genuine laughter at the sight.

Human? Barely at all. His silhouette against the sky is that of the dragon he'd once drawn in the sand for her to see, with wings of his own and that fin on his back and claws spread out as if to catch the wind. He can ride the sea air like any dragon, and does so, embracing the sky with those wings and gliding, circling and diving and spinning. She thinks she can hear him laughing too, if it's not just the echo of her own.

The only reason she tears her eyes away from him as he soars is that she hears Toothless sigh heavily. When Astrid looks around at him, she laughs all over again in amusement rather than amazement at the black dragon's eye-rolling look of exasperation.

She can almost hear him thinking _showoff_.

They belong together, the dragon and the dragon-man, and Toothless follows him into the sky as easily as a child running down stairs, so that they are flying as a pair over Berk again, diving and soaring and playing in the air, flying for the sheer joy of flight and being together.

From below, Astrid can clearly hear Stoick roar, _"What â€"_" He's briefly interrupted by a dragon's shriek, but when it stops she catches the rest of the sentence as _"â€" is that?"_

Oh, this is the strangest day of Astrid's life, and she hasn't had so much actual _fun_ in years.

"That's your son, Chief!" she yells back to him.

"And I hope you're proud of him," she adds, but only to herself. And if by some mad chance he isn't, _she_ will be for him.

All across the village below, she can see faces turn up to the flyers, and mouths open in surprise. She can't blame them. It's quite a sight, impossible and unbelievable even in the face of everything else that has happened today.

Eventually they reunite in midair, rider catching dragon-harness and slipping easily onto the black dragon's back, at which point Toothless beats his wings strongly and takes them back up.

When they land on the ledge next to her they are both grinning with the joy of it, and she smiles back, amazed beyond words.

Hiccup throws his arms out, showing those wings for what they are, and shrieks happily.

"Free," Astrid translates.

The way he repeats it, a sound that is pure dragon, makes it as much a feeling as a word, and it's the best feeling in the world.

* * *

><p>That evening, as it begins to get dark, the great leviathan off their coast rises to its feet, lifting its head and calling out.<p>

All across the village, dragons lift into the air to follow its summons. Some do not.

Some flee into the woods or away from the island entirely; a few remain in the village. That tame Nadder of Astrid's is one of them, Stoick sees quite clearly as the woman joins him at his vigil, although it stays a safe distance away from him.

He is watching the black dragon now perched on the roof of the Great Hall, where it " where they " have been for some time now, ever since that incredible stunt earlier. He can still taste the shock in his throat from when he realized that the little dragon gliding over the village was actually Hiccup, borne aloft on his own wings. Gobber has been keeping him company for most of the time, although he has mercifully refrained from trying to cheer his friend up with some joke or sarcastic observation.

"They're really all goin' to go?" Gobber asks Astrid now.

She shrugs. "I don't know. Enough of them, I think, that we'll never have to fight them again the way we have before. Some of them, maybe " look! There they go."

The strange dragons " his son's flock, his son's family " are taking off as well, escorting the former raiders to their chief's side and away in a flurry of wings and much rattling of claws and calling to each other, as the leviathan dives beneath the water and disappears from sight, even its wake fading.

Stoick is not particularly surprised that several people who have already been celebrating quite hard, dancing and singing and drinking and in some cases napping themselves into a better mood, have climbed up to the rooftops to wave goodbye-and-good-riddance to the dragons. One of them is bound to fall off any minute now, and he'll have to deal with that.

It's such a simple problem, with such a simple solution. Part of him is numbly surprised that such an ordinary thing could exist anymore.

When he hears the sound of wings much closer he realizes that he has taken his eyes off the Night Fury.

But it has come to him, and Hiccup is as always on its shoulders, and now they have alighted on a ramp overlooking the ocean and are watching the three Vikings. The dragon's wings are still spread, and they are ready to fly away.

"Do you think he would stay?" Stoick asks his best friend and his trusted deputy. "If I asked? If he knew " "

"Nae, Stoick," Gobber replies, as gently as he ever does. "Let 'im go. T'was the right thing t' do before, and it still is now. Let 'im fly."

"Besides," adds Astrid, "I already asked."

"What did he say?"

"You saw his response."

Oh.

Overhead, dragons call and wheel through the air, and Hiccup and Toothless both look up at the sound and the movement, away from the Vikings.

But even though it is getting dark, Stoick can see the smile that spreads across his son's face as his eyes close and he pets a still-clawed hand across the Night Fury's scales, see the way the black dragon tilts its head and smiles in its own right at his touch. It's not the battle-fired grin, not the defensive snarl, not the triumphant smirk.

It's simple and pure and real, and utterly human.

In a single leap, they are gone, joining the dragons vanishing into the growing darkness of the northern sky.

"Goodbye," says Stoick.

They almost certainly do not hear him, and if Astrid or Gobber hear the whisper they are sensible enough to keep it to themselves.

Instead, Gobber asks her, "So now wha' do we do?"

She actually smiles, and Stoick is proud of her answer. It's not that she's going to be a great leader someday. She already is one.

"Now we do what we always do. We rebuild. But let's get everything this time â€" from the ground up." Astrid looks around, and notes, "â€"which will be much easier if the twins don't burn the whole place down first, so I should probably go get them away from helping to build a bonfire and throw them in the well instead. No, no, there's no need to help me," she waves Gobber off, grinning. "I'm quite looking forward to it."

"Cannae no' at least watch?" Gobber demands, pursuing her as she strides off into the village to protect Vikings from themselves and twins alike.

As the night closes in and the villagers light fires of their own, human fires to warm them against the cold rather than dragon-fire to burn the place to ashes, Stoick wishes, even though he knows it is a wish that will never be granted, that Valka was still here. He doesn't know what they're going to make of Berk now that everything has changed, but he suspects his Val might have liked it.

And he thinks that she, too, would be very proud of their son.

* * *

><p>Travelling in the north is difficult, and it's easy to get lost. There are endless tiny islands, and from the ocean one often looks much like another. Landing on the wrong one is dangerous; landing on the right one unpredictable. The weather makes it risky, and the inhabitants make it even worse.<p>

If you survive that trip, and are lucky, you may encounter a volcano

inhabited by dragons, but no longer imprisoned by endless mist.

If your luck holds out, you may find an island of humans where not everyone rides dragons, and not everyone likes them, but a couple of the younger or crazier Vikings are willing to give it a try with the tamer ones, and Terrible Terrors get everywhere.

If you go even further north and have the luck of the gods themselves, you may find an island ringed in ice ruled over by a Bewilderbeast that learned a few useful things about fighting dominant dragons and put that experience to good use, winning its fight against a rival and scuttling completely the ambitions of a madman. There are even more dragons on the king's island than usual these days, many of them with scars.

But no matter how lucky you are, you may not find a clever black dragon with a partner who was born human but is now, as far as he or anyone else is concerned, a dragon himself.

It is entirely possible that Hiccup and Toothless have wandered off, together as always, again.

* * *

><p>To be concluded with an epilogue.

21. Chapter 21

ON WITH THE SHOW!

Nightfall_**, Part Twenty-One/Epilogue:**

Now spring is coming, and the snow is starting to melt. It is a good thing, a new wind, a warmer smell, and Hiccup and Toothless are glad of it.

They have spent the winter, as they are used to doing, with their family, safe and warm and together with them all. In the deepest winter there are many storms, and none of them are the good raging flashing roaring storms that are such fun to fly in; in winter ice freezes to wings and hurts and tears the wing and the blood in it so that they cannot fly at all. Instead the dragons of the king's sanctuary retreat into their caves and their safe places, twined together warm against the cold.

There were stories, and there was purring in a happy safe nest, and the king had hunted for his flock so that they did not have to go and freeze wings and paws in the deepest cold, so they would not starve when it was worst outside, because he is greater than any cold and he cares for his flock like a proper Alpha.

Throughout the winter their family has slept, dozing and waiting for the cold to go away and the sun to come back so it could warm them, waking to eat and to stre-e-e-e-tch a bit and to find more comfortable places, but there had been very much yawning all the time even when there was sun for a little while and not stars or snow.

Sleepy and warm, they had curled up all together to keep the heat for

their own, and the nest had all dreamed together, dreams of warmer days and of flying and playing and hunting together, and in triumph and pride of the great things that they have done.

And sometimes, they had even dreamed the dreams of the great king as he slept in the ice-cold water that is his home, just as the sky is theirs. Even now, Hiccup sighs and shudders and stretches with the memory of those dreams, bigger than little dragons could ever dream on their own. He had felt the tides in his bones as he dozed and ignored the hunger that was always more in the winter, felt the deep currents in the darkest parts of the oceans running through him, filling him and his family with dream-hunting and the safety of being together. The hunger is dulled that way, only nibbling at them from inside rather than biting, and it had been better to sleep, because heart-fires were shared and were safe-warm.

Dragons know how to fight winter; it is not a flying hunting or a screaming fighting thing, it is a patient stalking and waiting.

And now there are many new dragons in the nest, and it had been a joy and a goodness to teach the ones that they had freed from the trap that they did not have to be afraid anymore. They had not known how to be safe and happy but they had learned, because the flock had looked after them and it was better that way.

Hiccup purrs in satisfaction that the dragons that they had reclaimed from the monster are no longer afraid, that they had learned that when their queen had been defeated it had been a good thing, and that they did not need to fear, as they had, that she had been killed by something worse that would hurt them more. All around the two-who-are-one, they can hear dragons waking, calling out to each other and to them in spring-here-good relief, and greeting the wanderers and each other. There are dragon-kin-cousins chasing each other in the sky with the joy of the sun coming back this morning and after the dark winter.

There is snow around him but it is melting, with the spring sun and the warmth from his own small heart-fire that cannot be breathed out and Toothless warmer still at his back, purring with him and watching the sky from their perch. And there is warmth from beneath them as well, soaking through the rough surface to their stomachs.

The young dragon reasons that there must be a fire beneath it. Humans must like warm things too, and keep fires in their nests because they do not have fires inside their bodies.

Quietly, he chatters his surprise to Toothless that human nests are good to perch on, and Toothless huffs a short dragon-laugh back at him.

They have many new places to wander to, and they are eager to go after being in the nest all winter, but they have stopped here first to see what it is like now and to make sure that the humans have not hurt the dragons who did not go with the king, and to show to themselves that they are not afraid.

Together they do not have to be afraid, and they will face their fears with new courage from the fires of the sun that warm them.

For a while everyone was asleep, but now there are humans moving

around, and the stars have hidden away from the sun chasing them, and they cannot hear dragons hurting or frightened. There are small-cousins who have seen them and have swarmed all around until they were hungry and understood that the dragon-pair had petting and scratches but no food for them, so they have gone to hunt now. They can see the blue-spikes cousin who is brave and kind-hearted and was going to teach the _Uh strrrrTT_ to play better games, and there are others who are happy and not hurting.

You here you here you here you here! a two-heads cousin/s says happily all together, and lands on the perch with them. _Yes good here warm yes happy yes!_

Yes good yes curious wondering good you here? Toothless asks the cousin/s.

They purr in harmony, heads going up and down with laughing amusement. _No SHE no SHE yes good happy us together all flock good together no SHE good smell good wind good happy?_

Hiccup chirps at them happily; of course they can smell the wind, it is a good spring wind that smells of snow-melting and air that is good to fly in. He rolls onto his back briefly to pet at Toothless, who licks the clever paws on his dark scales and hums _love you_.

Me-and-me me-and-me! the cousin/s demand, so Hiccup pats them too and growls teasingly when they fight each other to be petted most, which is as silly as him arguing with Toothless but is fun sometimes.

Small-cousins fall out of the sky and climb all over them, chirping _us yes us happy yes you yes good strange-far-dragon-cousins here yes you here yes good yes!_ all together. _Good playing us playing us flying you flying you playing you yes here good?_ They are happy small-cousins and there are many of them here. Hiccup thinks that is good, because small-cousins are not fierce fighters even though they try, so they would hide if they were being hurt very much here. So if they are safe here, then he is pleased with that because the small-cousins were good to _Tt-(click)-th-phuh-ss_ when they were scared and alone, and they were fun to watch and talk to.

Soon there are many dragons who come to tell them that they are happy here, that the humans do not shout at them very much although sometimes they do if dragons are breaking things or trying to take things that humans have for themselves. But it is all agreed that it is good that they do not have to fight humans anymore, and they can all perch on the human nests and talk to each other.

The two-who-are-one are proud of themselves. This is a better place now, and Hiccup shifts to put the warm below under his back and lean against Toothless, raising his face to be nuzzled and licked at, which Toothless does gladly, humming at him.

From below, there is a sound, and Hiccup sits up, thinking a game to play and a try-and-see thing to do.

Quietly, like he is stalking a fish that will dart away if it sees his shadow or hears his pawsteps, he twines around the dragon-cousins who have come to roost with them and moves to the edge of the top of

the human nest, putting his paw into a pile of melting snow and peeking over the edge sneakily.

Toothless follows him, low to the warm top of the nest, and pokes his nose into his side, huffing at him _no careful you careful no you silly_ and rolling his eyes.

Hiccup takes the paw out of the snow and begs _please?_, making his eyes go big and curious and bringing his shoulders down as if to pounce and play. They have been kept in the nest all winter and now he is spring-wild and warm-silly and is daring himself to do things just for the wild joy of doing them.

No! Toothless snorts at him, unmoved by his begging.

His beloved-companion wrinkles his snub nose at the bigger dragon. But when he pushes the snow over the edge to fall he makes sure it falls _next to_ the _pfikingr_ Alpha who has come out of the nest to shout things about dragons all around his nest, and not on top of him like playing in the snow with family, which is a good game.

Below, the red-furred Alpha snarls and growls and looks all around for where the snow has come from, like Cloudjumper when he does not want to play the snow game anymore but _Tt-(click)-th-phuh-ss_ still want to play with him even though he is glaring at them.

Hiccup tenses and puts his back against his Toothless-_love_, ready to flee now rather than ready to play, changing his mood as quick as flying in spring storms, wondering what the Alpha will do. He had seen that the _chfff_ was not a threat anymore when they came here and fought everyone to make them stop fighting, and the dragons here are happy, and if he really was their mother's mate and they were his hatchlings once then he will not bite. If he growls for real and is angry and tries to bite then they will fly away; if he does not and knows that they are only playing like hatchlings that nip to see what big dragons will do then they will stay a little while.

But they need to know, so this is a try-and-see.

They are not _quite_ sure if it is an all right thing to put snow on Alphas. At home no one puts snow on the king because he is too big to put snow on, but the _pfikingr_ Alpha is not as big as the great king. It is puzzling. Now they will know.

He stops shouting in a giving-up way, and Hiccup sits up to look over the edge at him.

When he sees them on top of the nest he is surprised. And then he is very happy that they are there, so it must be an all right thing. He makes a human smile with teeth in it but not biting teeth, and says Hiccup's name â€" still wrong, but Hiccup can accept that humans just cannot say his name right. He says many more things that they do not understand, but he sounds very happy.

So Hiccup grins a dragon-grin back at him, spring-wild again with relief. He leaps to Toothless' shoulders, and the dragon-pair flies away but not far. The Alpha of the human nest knows that they are here, and he is glad they are here, so now they will explore a bit. The wandering pair has been in a single place all winter sleeping winter-sleeps when being awake is just a thing to do between naps,

and while their home nest is the best of places they are all wiggly now and they want to run and fly and look at new things!

And there are many new things to look at here!

Us us us! the two-heads cousin/s say happily, following them to the ground. _Us you come look you look see come us nest!_

When they have seen where the two-heads cousin/s who are Amber-and-Gold and their friend/s who are Sneak-and-Secret have their nest, which is close to their favorite humans, there are other cousins who want to show them things and places that they like.

It is a better place for dragons now, and there are humans who look at them with smiles even though there are also humans who look at them and smell angry or scared, but do not throw things or slash at them with sharp-claws.

Hiccup and Toothless have come here to see what it is like now, and because sometimes in the winter huddling even though their family was all around them and the king was protecting them and the monster is _dead_ they had shared nightmares, and the nightmares were worse because they had been real.

But now there is sunlight, and they are awake and not dreaming and there is a real island under their paws that is not a place of nightmares and monsters anymore. Together they can see that, they can hear it in the calling of dragons and the different calling of humans, and they know because they _saw_ that the feeling-sound that trapped dragons has been frozen silent forever.

They will not let the thing that was here " a monster that is dead now " or the things that are here " humans who cannot catch them and have no more hurting lies to tell them " scare them away from somewhere they could wander.

So they will visit, when they pass by, when they travel this way, if it is a good place to stop and to rest with hunting and flying and no traps. But if anyone here tries to trap them, then they will set their tail to the place and never come back again.

It will not and will never be their home. But they can be friendly strangers, and put their noses into a dragon nest that is not theirs even if they will not live there to stay. They have wandered long enough that there are other places like this, where they are known but do not belong.

Their friends who are grateful to them and to their family show them the human nest that dragons can live in now too. Together they run all over it to show the wanderers some humans who give them food sometimes. The humans have learned that dragons are good to be with when it is cold, because dragons have fires inside like human nests only dragons can purr so they are _better._

Humans are silly not to know that, Hiccup mutters to Toothless, but Toothless reminds him that here it was not their fault that the monster was making them fight each other.

When the humans have stopped patting the dragons that they have learned to like now, their friends fly away and show the

two-who-are-one places they have found that are warm even in the deepest cold of winter.

The _pfikingr_ have put trees in the middle of the nest and there are traps for ashes on top but they are not traps that bite, they are like nests for ashes only metal, and Toothless flies up, his beloved with him, to see the good nest that a fire-skin cousin has made in one.

Good bright warm nest humans fire humans looking no-sun fire nest, Forest Fire tells them that it is. He likes to roost in it because it is supposed to be on fire, and he likes to burn things to see what they will look like and to curl up in them. And the humans do not mind now that he burns this one as long as he does not make it fall over.

They do not like that, so Forest Fire will not do it again.

And then there is a human nest with fire and loud noises and the smell of metal in it, and there is a _pfikingr_ with strange paws and a different voice in it too. This one also makes happy and amazed noises when they poke their noses into the den to smell the interesting smells like rock-skin cousin fires, so it must be all right for them to be here. It is very warm in there and there is lots of metal. Hiccup wants to steal it but the metal's owner is watching and shaking his head with an amazed big smile with strange teeth "how did he know? They will have to be careful if he knows to tell them _no_ even though Hiccup did not even try to touch any of it. And they have come to be good and not to raid, so he does not steal any.

They look at as much as they can from outside the nest, Hiccup still on Toothless' back, because they are reluctant to go in. Caves are good, but nests made by humans are too much like traps "how will they know how to get out again?

Soon there are too many humans who have come to look at them. Both Hiccup and Toothless are not comfortable with that even if they are staying away and only looking and making amazed and interested _pfikingr_ sounds to each other. Their friends here are purring at humans that they know but the dragon-pair does not know these humans.

So they take off in a single leap and fly for a while in the warmer spring-coming winds to feel better and remember that they are not trapped with humans anymore. Now they can fly if they want to and they can escape if they need to and there is nothing calling them except their own curiosity so they do not have to be afraid.

When they come down again with the smell of snow melting and new green things and prey in their noses, and many scents from far away that they chased and caught up there where they belong, they perch on another nest and watch everything for a while where no one can reach them, talking together and reassuring each other even though Toothless is still bristling just a little and Hiccup is crooning _nervous_ at all the strangers all around.

The red-furred Alpha _St-t-t-t-t-kk_ finds them again and watches them as they watch everything else, and Guarding Metal joins him and talks to him in words the dragon-pair cannot understand from this far

away. But they are both staying at a safe distance so they do not need to hide from them just yet. If the Alpha looks like he is hunting them then they will go somewhere else.

But when the human with the many pictures all together comes over to talk at them happily they come down, because Hiccup wants to see the pictures, and he is content to do that for a while, only half-listening to the many sounds that the human he comes to think of as Talking Fish says to him, and not understanding much other than 'drakkkn' anyway.

They are interesting pictures of many, many dragons, with scratch marks like tracks to follow all around them, but he knows there are more kinds of dragons than this. Because it is good that Talking Fish will share the pictures with him, he manages to ask with the gestures that _pfikingr_ understand better if he can draw a picture on the papers.

Talking Fish says with his movements and the sound of his voice that this is all right, so the dragon-pair fly off to find a good drawing stick, returning quickly and settling down again.

Hiccup draws Rain Mother on one of the papers so she can be in the pictures, and then Fierce on the other side so he can be too. It is all right to draw pictures of nest-mates because the humans cannot actually find them, so it is safe.

Talking Fish is very, very happy about this like a hatchling with a new toy, and Hiccup and Toothless retreat before he can pounce on them in excitement because he is bigger than a hatchling and they do not know if he bites.

Again there are too many humans here that have come while Hiccup was drawing, and they have not come to see humans. They were worried about the dragons that stayed here. And they were traveling this way because they were going this way before rocks were flying and they fell and the monster tried to steal them. They still want to go this way and see what they did not get to find before.

So they fly away together to a place where there is grass and no human nests, but they can see the human nests from here in case strangers approach.

You here you here good good you here happy good here, the blue-spikes cousin says, roosting near them.

Toothless thrums at her and whistles the questions that he and his Hiccup-_beloved_ have asked many times now, _you here good yes good yes happy yes curious here what here good yes?_

She chirps, pleased. _Good yes better relief cold gone SHE gone relief free relief relief happy free happy gratitude you gratitude impressed gratitude good you good gratitude SHE gone._

Toothless purrs _smug_ and _proud_ at the praise. They are always ready to be told what good dragons they are.

Cradled in his front paws, lying on his back with his throat exposed trustingly, Hiccup yelps amusement and reaches up to scratch under his chin for him until Toothless sighs and cannot hold the proud

stance anymore and drops his head onto his heart's-companion, making Hiccup chirp with laughter and bringing their faces close enough to rub together with _love love love love_.

You she pfikingr she yes good yes playing good she good? Hiccup asks over Toothless' head, sitting up so that now Toothless is cradled in his paws, at least part of him, rather than the other way around. He has grown slightly too big to fit entirely under Toothless' chin the way he could when he was a littler dragon-fledgling, but they are happiest together and it is good that he is big enough to hold Toothless too the way Toothless has always held him.

The blue dragon raises her head proudly. _Me Flies-in-Storms me good me she mine hatchling silly maybe she good affection exasperation me Flies-in-Storms happy. _She is pleased to have a name that everyone knows.

It is a good name. They have to like a dragon whose name means Flies-in-Storms. _Us fly yes us flying storm-air-warning,_ Hiccup purrs, _flying storm-air-warning good good happy like_.

Soon _Uh strrrrTT_ finds them and is pleased to see them. She waves a greeting wave and approaches carefully, waiting to be snarled at.

Hiccup does not snarl at her â€" she is not hunting them now. This is her nest and not theirs, so she can be here if she wants to. But he does turn away from her so that she cannot pounce into his stomach and tear at him, curling into Toothless so that they are in a pile together like sleeping in a nest. He turns his shoulder to her instead and watches her out of the side of his eyes, humming _curious relaxed maybe no-threat maybe curious she she here maybe fine fine_ to Toothless, who breathes against his skins, ending on a sigh and briefly shuttering his eyes against the light.

He still only understands scraps of what she says with noises, but he watches her and listens to her voice to figure out most of what she means.

She is happy to see him; she is less happy to see Toothless but then Toothless is the one watching her to be sure she does not become a threat, and Toothless does good glaring even at dragons that are much bigger than they are and even when he is curled up as if sleeping. She is happy that Flies-in-Storms is here. She likes petting the blue dragon, which makes Flies-in-Storms chirp at her as the _pfikingr_ she settles down to the ground with her legs folded awkwardly, but she is comfortable there. She is surprised to see both of them, and she is making shy looks like they are intimidating now.

He does not object to that. Hiccup does not like that she had seen them so scared before, so it is good that she is seeing them brave and free and flying now.

After that she is telling them too many things that he cannot pick out like scraps of fat he can eat from red meat he cannot, like when Northern Lights brings home furry water prey for Hiccup to take the fur off before she eats it. She does not like the taste of it but she knows he likes the feel of the soft fur, and she does not mind if he eats some of the kill too.

But he thinks _Uh strrrrTT_ does not expect him to listen and is just talking almost the way he talks to Toothless, talking just because it is good to talk sometimes when there are spring winds and everyone is wiggling with wanting to fly and run and play and hunt outside the nest.

As she talks, Flies-in-Storms noses curiously at the flying-with on Toothless and croons curiously _this this good you this like yes good?_

Toothless cranes his head around to look at the battered leather, dislodging his heart's-love, who shifts and adjusts uncomplainingly to his new position. The black dragon thinks about the question, but not for very long.

Yes yes yes, he chirps, _us together this good yes Hiccup-beloved-adored us together flying flying flying good happy._ The flying-with is a very good thing and he likes wearing it because then they can fly together wildly and madly and as quick as they like and even upside-down.

Good him you good together-flying? Flies-in-Storms asks under the talking sounds of the _Uh strrrrTT_, using their sound for the idea.

The black dragon closes his eyes and smiles a big dragon-smile and purrs very hard " flying together is the _best_ thing.

Full of love for his other half, Hiccup curls into his shoulder and hums _you me we us_ very softly, just for them to hear.

His all-but-silent song is interrupted by _Uh strrrrTT_, who says a laughing thing that might mean she has noticed they are not listening to her. She does not sound too angry, though.

Me do yes determined yes me too, Flies-in-Storms declares, lifting her head.

You she pfikingr she together-flying do yes you? Toothless asks.

Yes yes yes good she like she like us playing together-flying us.

Hiccup looks at his other half and shrugs " it might be fun to watch, and they always like to fly with their friends.

The young dragon-man nudges Toothless away just a little bit so he can get to his paws without the bigger dragon's weight on him, and leaps readily to his place on his partner's shoulders even as Toothless rises to all his paws, coordinating their movements without thinking about it as they prepare to fly.

From her place sitting on the ground, _Uh strrrrTT_ makes a sad and disappointed talking noise that they are going away.

Hiccup looks at her and shakes his head no. He points to her, then to Flies-in-Storms; he gestures _come here you_ because he knows she knows that signal, and then points up where there are cousins

flying.

She looks surprised and confused, looking from the two-who-are-one to the dragon-cousin who is determined to be her friend and back again.

The dragon-man taps his paws on Toothless' skull impatiently. Now that they are up and thinking about flying he wants to fly now. They have been stuck in the nest all winter and he is feeling very crazy but in a good way. Even when Toothless clicks at his restlessness he knows that his dragon-half is just as wild inside because they had played very rough fun games once they were no longer going to knock into everyone else and could pounce on each other and chase each other with room to run. So he repeats the gesture to her, adding an irritated faint yelp that she does not understand.

Flies-in-Storms nudges her with her nose and dips a shoulder to her.

Only then do her eyes go very huge and she makes an amazed smile. She does understand now.

They wait as she and Flies-in-Storms figure out how they are going to fly together, but when she is riding on the blue dragon's back and holding on tight to a spike they grin at dragon she and pfikingr she alike and leap.

Behind them they can hear Flies-in-Storms call out that she is following them, and the shrieking of Uh strrrrTT, which makes Hiccup laugh. She sounds very afraid but excited a little, and they have not even gone very fast yet.

This is slow; they are barely hovering, just getting higher in the air.

He looks over his shoulder and past Toothless' wings to grin at her as they circle and soar.

When they are at a height above the island where the wind is good for flying very fast Hiccup laughs to himself and Toothless equally.

She had tried to drag him into her world and could not, so now it is his turn because that is how good dragon games are played " let her try to be in his!

Follow you follow us fast we fast go follow can't-catch-us! he calls to Flies-in-Storms, who whistles back her acceptance of the challenge.

Beneath him, he can feel Toothless thrum laughter at the good joke they are playing.

Ready ready? Hiccup asks.

Toothless purrs at him " he is always ready.

Flying! Hiccup cries, and they dive.

Behind them there is the sound of Flies-in-Storms following them;

behind them there is the funnier sound of the _pfikingr_ she yelling as they plummetâ€¦|_none of it matters .__

They are flying together fast and crazy and wonderful and that is everything that matters in the world.

Lowering himself close to Toothless' scales and hunching his shoulders against the air, Hiccup shrieks in delight as they hurtle close to the rocks of the cliff and turn just-in-time close enough to touch but not so close that Toothless' wings will hit the rock and gain a new scar, and they follow the line of the cliff up and up and up until they have outrun the rock and there is only sky around them.

They spin and charge past Flies-in-Storms and her rider who is not crying out anymore. She is only holding on with big big eyes and her paws wrapped around the blue dragon's neck as far as they will go, and they are gone too quickly to even laugh.

Now they soar through a flock of dragon-kin who scatter around them when they shriek ahead a warning that _us us us here watch-out us!_ and the human-nest flock scolds them as they fly, but they are not afraid and they will not _hit_ anyone, they are too good at this for that.

Tt-(click)-th-phuh-ss fly past Forest Fire's nest in the fire-tree and fly low through the _pfikingr_ nests but high enough that they will not scare _too_ many humans although there is very much shouting behind them when they are all the way through and flying over the water, and when Hiccup glances back behind them and past Toothless' tail he sees that Flies-in-Storms and _Uh strrrrTT_ are both still following them.

Flies-in-Storms is a good chaser, and this is a fun game.

She chases them over the waves and around sea fangs and back through the human nest one more time until they let her catch them and tap them with her tail, but that just means that now they can turn around and chase _her!_

But they do not get to do that for very long before she whistles _she strrrrTT she scared chasing-game no-more down she scared._

Although the dragon-pair wants to play more she will not be convinced, and it is hard to play chasing games all by themselves. They can do that on the ground and it is a good game but not in the air because Hiccup cannot fly very fast on his own. So they follow her and her rider reluctantly back to the place where they took off.

When she lands she has to crouch all the way down as if asleep in a nest so that the _pfikingr_ she can untangle her paws and get to the ground, where she falls over because her back legs are wobbly and she does not know how to use her front paws to balance better.

Flies-in-Storms chirps _curious worry concern worry question you worry_, nosing at her where she lies on the grass.

But she is breathing, so she will be all right, Hiccup thinks,

somewhat smugly, and she raises a paw weakly to push the blue dragon's nose away from her head so it can lay still.

By the time she sits up again and is not breathing only in gasps anymore, Hiccup and Toothless are curled up together on the grass a safe distance away doing their best pretending that they usually do when Cloudjumper _thinks_ they have done something they were not supposed to and they _have_ done it but he did not _see_ them do it. It is hard not to smile smiles with lots of teeth and tongues flashing and to manage not to purr at her. It had been a good joke to fly too fast and scare her, but they are good at this pretending. They do it often.

She does not get angry.

Her eyes light up and her face does a big smile and she makes a noise like a hatchling that has discovered a great game and wants to do it again.

So that is all right.

But she jumps and is very surprised with big eyes when Flies-in-Storms pokes her with her nose to get her attention and then makes a _strrrrTT_ noise when she does not pet the blue-dappled dragon quickly enough.

* * *

><p>They still do not want her to get close enough to touch them â€" she does not get to choose when to do that â€" but she looks carefully at the flying-with and then goes away for a while to get some rope before they try to teach her to fly again.

* * *

><p>The next time she flies she does better and screams less. Dragon-kin watch her and humans watch her and after a while she acts proud to be looked at by them and to be flying instead of acting frightened.<p>

But the next time they come down _St-t-t-t-t-kk_ is in the field.

Hiccup and Toothless bristle a bit and land safely away from him, watching him out of the corner of their eyes. They are not _afraid_ of him, but they do not know what to make of him, and because he is bigger than them and an Alpha they are wary when they are on the same ground. Besides, they had thrown snow at him and while he had not been unhappy then he may be unhappy now.

But they can always fly away if they need to. He carries no sharp-claw and no heavy-striking to hit dragons with, and he does not look like he is hunting them or angry at them. Instead he carries a holding-thing like the one _she_ had brought food and paper in to the shoreline where they were trapped.

So they sit alertly on the other side of the field and watch him as _Uh strrrrTT_ unwinds the rope from Flies-in-Storms, who stretches her wings, refolds them, and then finds good cool grass to dig up and settle down and rest in. The two-who-are-one chatter to each other

wary curious ready alert wary pfikingr worried? alert question wary wary and reassure themselves with touch that they are safe together.

As they watch, the two _pfikingr_ sit down on the grass together and take food out of the holding-thing. They eat some of it themselves, and she gestures to them to come closer, making reassuring sounds.

They do not come closer.

She rolls her eyes â€" that is a good dragon expression that they recognize â€" and asks again.

Flying she maybe flying good maybe, Hiccup mutters skeptically, leaning his chin on the back of Toothless' head where they crouch on the ground, hiding part of his face behind his dragon-love's skull and ears.

They slink a _little_ closer because otherwise she will keep asking and that will be annoying.

Then the red-furred Alpha who once might have been their mother's mate holds out food to them.

Hiccup tips his head on one side curiously, smelling burnt-fish.

Toothless hums a question â€" what should they do? They understand that they are being offered food to share with part of the human flock, and they cannot see a trap in how the humans talk with their bodies without knowing that they are saying if they are hunting, and the grass that they have walked on already has not been more disturbed than it was just from them landing on it.

The Alpha says Hiccup's name in the _pfikingr_ wrong way, and offers the burnt-fish again.

The dragon-man thinks about it, chirping and muttering and humming, working through the possibilities and the problems, trying to interpret what is happening here through his knowledge of the complex social rules of a dragon nest.

He knows the _pfikingr_ Alpha believes that he was their mama Aka's mate; he knows that _pfikingr_ think that he is not a proper dragon â€" although they are wrong and he _is_ â€" because their mother was human. But they think that Toothless is a proper dragon. He knows that the red-furred human had tried very hard to trap and keep this half of him, but not the Toothless-half. So he thinks that they are different.

But that is not right. They are _one_.

If _St-t-t-t-t-kk_ is going to insist that he was Hiccup's mother's mate, then he has to be _Toothless'_ mother's mate as well. If they are going to put their noses into this nest every so often, then the Alpha of the nest must know who they are. No good Alpha would admit strangers to a nest if they were not known and trusted. So he must treat them the same, because they are the same.

Hiccup sits up on Toothless' shoulders and purrs to his beloved _reassurance you trust yes?_

Toothless huffs at him _yes yes yes always silly you silly reckless yes-anyway_ and rolls his eyes.

The dragon-man looks at the _pfikingr chfff_ directly, challengingly " he can challenge an Alpha, they can do that! " and points at the fish, then at Toothless. Then he sets his shoulders stubbornly and lifts his chin, baring his throat and glaring over it, daring the Alpha to leap for the vulnerable point and reinforcing his challenge.

If he wants to not be enemies anymore, he may feed them, but he must feed _both_ of them.

Watching his beloved-companion's signals with his head tipped to one side to look over his own shoulder, Toothless sighs as he understands the challenge. But it is right. So he raises his head and joins his stare to his other half's as they face down the Alpha of the humans, who is struggling to understand.

What is he thinking as he does so? They cannot tell. His signals are closed-off and he is trying to keep them hidden; his eyes meet theirs but there is too much puzzlement and too many other things in them to read. Some of them are sad, though.

Hiccup hisses with annoyance that _pfikingr_ are so difficult. Dragons make sense.

"Tt-th-ss ffssh," he says aloud, trying to put the ideas together in a way they will understand, beckoning _give_. "Aka (click)-phuh mama isss. Aka Tt-th-ss mama isss." And he adds their combined name that is both of them at once, _Tt-(click)-th-phuh-ss_.

That is the closest he can get in _pfikingr_ sounds, and if the Alpha _still_ does not understand the rules then they will not play the game at all.

Both halves, or none.

Across the space between them, _Uh strrrrTT_ puts a paw on the Alpha's shoulder and talks at him urgently. Hiccup can recognize his name and Toothless' name, and 'drakkkn'; the word that means 'mama' and the _chfff_ noise for a human Alpha. So maybe she understands better and she can talk for them.

They wait for his understanding, but they will not wait forever. It is _spring_ and there are good traveling winds and they can maybe get very far this time before they run into more trouble as they probably will. So Toothless spreads his wings and tenses and they prepare to take off.

If they are not welcome here as they are, two-who-are-one and a dragon-pair together, then they will go and not come back.

But the Alpha meets their challenge.

He has a look in his eyes that is confused and brave and surprised and sad all at once, but he takes another burnt-fish from the

holding-thing. Then he gets to his feet and very slowly comes towards them. They watch every step and every movement just in case he is going to pounce after all and he has a sharp thing hidden like Toothless' fangs.

He does not pounce. He holds out a burnt-fish to Toothless, and he holds out another burnt-fish to Hiccup.

The black dragon sniffs at the fish and cannot smell anything wrong with it except that it is burnt, which is not something _wrong_ so much as different from what they usually eat, communicating this to his partner-love with a flick of one ear-flap and a glance of an eye.

The red-furred Alpha flinches when Toothless snaps the fish from his paw, but he holds his ground until Hiccup has taken the other fish, which he does carefully, donning his dragon-claws to grip it better and to remind the _pfikingr chfff_ that if this is a trap he will regret it. They are hunters and destroyers of traps, even traps set by Alphas.

It is not a trap. The Alpha backs away but he is sort of happy and not retreating-scared and _Uh strrrrTT_ is smiling with no teeth and triumph and happiness in her body, so the two-who-are-one can curl up together and eat and rest safely, purring and petting _love surprise love joy confusion love puzzlement not-important love love love_ to each other.

As long as they are accepted here as they are, then this might be an all right nest to visit after all, now and again when they are nearby.

The monster that was an eater of dragons is gone, and they helped to do that. The humans who are here are not fighting dragons anymore, and they helped to do that too. So they have probably earned a perch from time to time as they travel by, whether they are on their way home or going away to new places.

* * *

><p>It is later. It is dark, and they are basking in the starlight and the new-thin moonlight from above and the sun-warmth still kept in the rock below, Hiccup held in Toothless' paws and stroking soft paws across his scales as the young dragon leans against his shoulder so they are close and safe together. Every breath and every heartbeat says love and _together_ and _you me we us_ to each other, and reinforces the perfect unity they share.

Toothless licks his fur affectionately, nudging their faces together in a devoted caress. _Flying we us flying now?_ He raises his head to look out to sea.

The dragon-man, who is half of him, the one he loves best in all the world and who returns that love equally and unconditionally, sighs happily. _Yes yes you me we us flying-together us go flying us farâ€|_ His thought trails off into wordless purrs of _contentment_ and _anticipation_ all at once, pressing his lips against Toothless' dark scales so that the feeling of it hums and shudders through them both.

His beloved whistles softly, curiously. Where?

Hiccup chirps a dragon's laugh, and it turns into a soft exhilarated cry that suggests maybe-possible and everything and everywhere, like wings spread wide and spinning all around, like dancing, like flying.

Where will they go?

Anywhere they want to.

The young dragon, wild and free and loved, content in what he is, raises one clawed paw, narrowing his eyes as they watch the familiar stars turn in the night sky.

He picks one, and points, and Toothless-heart-of-mine follows his gaze. That way.

Even though the sky is full of stars, even though all the sky is stars so they will never run out of them, they know they are looking at the same one.

And in a moment they are gone, vanished together into the night.

* * *

><p>End.

* * *

><p>Afterword: Thank you all for coming with me through this story. If you reviewed anonymously, please know that I very much appreciated your words and your time and often wished very much that I could write back to you! (If you reviewed while logged in, you already know that I like writing back to you.) If you have been following this story all along, thank you for sticking with me; if you have just now found it, welcome and thank you for reading it all!

In gratitude, please have a soundtrack for this story (assembled in part by some of you!), some fan art, and a collection of random trivia about this story if random trivia interests you. This bonus material can be found at [http: \(double slash\) le-letha dot deviant art dot com slash # slash journal slash HTTYD-Nightfall-Extras-475344204](http://(double slash) le-letha dot deviant art dot com slash # slash journal slash HTTYD-Nightfall-Extras-475344204)

You have all touched me greatly, and I cannot thank you enough for making this story exciting to plan and fun to write and something I have wanted to come back to every day. Every word of it has been worthwhile because I knew you were out there. So thank you.

Fair flight to you all.

Le'letha

End
file.